

The Shaping of Modern Calcutta

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The Lottery Committee Years, 1817–1830

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NIYOGI
BOOKS

Published by
NIYOGI BOOKS
Block D, Building No. 77,
Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-I,
New Delhi-110 020, INDIA
Tel: 91-11-26816301, 26818960
Email: niyogibooks@gmail.com
Website: www.niyogibooksindia.com

Text © Ranabir Ray Choudhury

Editor: Sucharita Ghosh
Design: Shashi Bhushan Prasad

ISBN:
Publication: 2021

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Printed at: Niyogi Offset Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, India

For
Shipra, Ayana, Sushovona,
Aurobindo and Ranadev

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INTRODUCTION

In 1901, A.K. Ray wrote in the *Census of India*: 'It may be truly said that it was under the direction of the Lottery Committee that the work of reconstructing chaotic Calcutta into the decent shape of a modern town was not only inaugurated but pushed on with vigour'.¹ This book attempts to shed some light on how the work was accomplished. The present volume is, in fact, a supplement to the author's earlier work, *A City in the Making: Aspects of Calcutta's Early Growth*,² which dealt with the spatial growth of Calcutta (Kolkata) from the time of Job Charnock (1690) till the setting up in October 1817 of the Committee to Superintend the Effective Use of the Lottery Funds, known as the Lottery Committee. In this book, the story is taken up to 1830 when, for all practical purposes, the committee's effective work was over, the East India Company in London asking its Government in Calcutta that it be 'abolished'.³

The book is rooted in the official records of the committee's work spread over thirteen years which, essentially, comprise a collection of disparate events and themes, all of them tied to the main thread of the city's spatial development. The central effort has been to segregate the diverse individual threads and form each into a consistent account, all the separate strands taken together yielding (hopefully) a depiction of how the city of Calcutta acquired the rudiments of its present road-grid. To mention just a handful of the separate items which make up the

story, Strand Road along the river was conceived and built by the committee as was also the arterial thoroughfare stretching from Shyambazar in the north to Park Street (now Mother Teresa Sarani) in the south comprising Bidhan Sarani, College Street, Nirmal Chunder Street, and Rafi Ahmed Kidwai Road. Amherst Street (Raja Rammohun Sarani) was built along with Cornwallis Street (Bidhan Sarani), Colootala Street (partly Maulana Shaukat Ali Street, Acharya Brojen Sil Street and Angarika Dharmapala Street) and Mirzapur Street (Surya Sen Street) being constructed linking Chitpur Road (Rabindra Sarani) in the west to Circular Road (Upper Circular Road was renamed Acharya Prafulla Chandra Road) in the east. To the west and south-west of today's BBD Bagh (then Tank Square), Koila Ghat Street (Babu Tarapada Mukherjee Sarani), Hare Street and Hastings Street (Kiron Shankar Roy Road) were opened up. Bankshall Street was created from an open space in front of the Governor's house in the early 18th century, and Church Lane, to the west of St John's churchyard, was given the consolidated shape of a street. Two 'ancient' roads, Clive Street (Netaji Subhas Road) and Chitpur Road, were widened while the entire area of Garden Reach behind the row of garden houses on the southern bank of the Hooghly was developed with roads and drainage being built resulting in an influx of native residents.

Another feather in the committee's cap was the clearing up of the vast tract of low-lying ground between Theatre Road (Shakespeare Sarani) and Circular Road (Lower Circular Road was renamed Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose Road), a large part of which was not only known as *dhankhet* (rice field) at the time and earlier but which was also a hotbed of pestilence because of its marshy nature. As far as the aesthetic aspect is concerned, it was the Lottery Committee which introduced to the city the brick-and-mortar balustrade which today lines both sides of Red Road (Indira Gandhi Sarani) and the western side of Chowringhee Road

(the northern part of which, till Park Street, has been renamed Jawaharlal Nehru Road).⁴

While it is true that the Lottery Committee did seminal work for the spatial development of Calcutta, what it achieved in reality was not much more than just scratching the surface as it were if the work left undone is considered. James Ranald Martin's *Notes on the Medical Topography of Calcutta*⁵ indicates clearly the unsatisfactory state the city was in at the time the committee folded up. A similar picture is portrayed by F.P. Strong at around the same time.⁶ Even so, the question arises: why were the measures taken by the committee to improve the city not taken earlier? After all, the Earl of Moira (created the Marquess of Hastings in late 1816), under whose aegis the Lottery Committee was set up, had assumed the Governor-Generalship in 1813, which means that he waited for nearly four years before the committee was appointed and began its work. Before the committee's appointment, and since the departure of Lord Minto (Moira's predecessor), water tanks had been dug and deepened and important roads such as Chitpur Road had been widened. During the Minto years (1807-13), drainage projects had been taken up, some in the native parts of the town.⁷ Baithakkhanah Road (Bowbazar Street, later Bepin Behary Ganguly Street) had been extended to make the crucial connexion with Chitpur Road at Lalbazar, streets in the native areas had been paved with brick, and an important canal had been constructed towards the east (Beliaghata Canal). At the time the Lottery Committee took over, the 'great Sibleah drain' was in the process of being implemented. These projects had been planned and implemented by the Committee for the Improvement of the Town and later by the Board of Conservancy which was made up of the city magistrates. As far as the provision of funds was concerned, they were generated by the lottery proceeds since the first drawing in 1809.⁸



It was argued in *A City in the Making* that the era of planning for the spatial development of Calcutta (the effective regulation of space) had begun with Lord Wellesley's appointment of his Committee for the Improvement of the Town in 1803. There were more reasons than one why Wellesley (1798-1805) penned his 1803 minute and appointed the committee, both steps taken together representing a quantum shift in the story of Calcutta's growth. In its essence, however, both steps were nothing more than the decision of a single individual, the contemporary records holding no indication whatever of a collective realisation that the need for tackling the city's spatial drawbacks had reached a critical point. It was different with the Lottery Committee's appointment in 1817, the step being more in the nature of a *systemic* response transcending the wishes of any one individual. Briefly, since in particular 1815, the working of the prevailing 'system' of planning and implementing city development projects had revealed clearly the weak links in the 'process' then current, to the point that they could not be allowed to continue to exist any longer. Consequently, everything, so to speak, inevitably pointed to the next stage of 'progress', that is, the introduction of a new system which would be more effective in attaining the objective. Unlike Wellesley, the Governor-General of the time, Lord Hastings merely played the role of a catalyst, the 'process' culminating in the appointment of the new committee.

During the Minto years, and the early period of Hastings's ten-year reign (1813-23), the magistrates of the town played a critical role in the proceedings which focussed on the city's spatial growth. When the Board of Conservancy took over the responsibilities of the Committee for Improvement of the Town,⁹ the shift really meant that the magistrates were once again taking over the superintendence of such activity. But, as hindsight shows, time for the old system was fast running out, the shift to the Board of Conservancy representing nothing more than the last

flicker of a candle which was on the point of being extinguished.¹⁰ Within a couple of years the new Lottery Committee would be appointed in which the role of the magistrates would be curtailed effectively. Admittedly, John Eliot, Judge and Magistrate of the Suburbs of Calcutta, would be designated 'president' of the new committee, but this was more the reflection of his seniority in the service than anything else. In fact, the composition of the new committee would be influenced strongly by officials like the Acting Chief Secretary to the Government, William Butterworth Bayley (who was junior to Eliot in the service), and non-official heavyweights like George James Gordon, Arthur Jacob Macan and A. Colvin, Jr., not to speak of other civilians like Henry Wood and Charles Trower (another official, Henry Shakespear, was to join the committee later as also Lieutenant Charles Paton). There is little doubt that Eliot's presence, in the position he held, would be something to contend with, but he passed away barely a few months after the committee was appointed, snapping the links of the new committee with the old magistracy.

If merely the dilution of the role of the city magistrates in determining the spatial growth of the city was to lead, eventually, to the shaping of a new Calcutta, the point can be made that the attributes of the 'new system' were directly responsible for the change. What, then, was this 'new system' which Lord Hastings introduced into the core of the city's spatial planning? Seen in a broader perspective, the Governor-General was merely treading in the footsteps of Warren Hastings who was, effectually, the East India Company's first administrator to realise that there existed a wholly different aspect of the Company's territorial control other than just maximising commercial profit. Basically, it involved the fundamental transition of the Company's India administration from the mindset of a trader fixated on making the highest profit in given circumstances to that of a responsible, even conscientious, political manager who had to keep in mind,

among other things, the ‘welfare of subjects’. Peter Robb has summarised the transition thus:¹¹

The East India Company was developing its own notions of public service from the 1760s to the 1840s... Contrary to common opinion and despite the excesses of interest groups and of many individuals, Company servants recognised from their first exercise of political power that the Company needed to take a long view rather than a quick profit. Amidst public and private greed, they conceded that it had a duty of care to its Indian subjects... [Warren Hastings’] or his contemporaries’ concerns with landed property, legal rights, education, and scholarly or geographical explorations all fitted some idea or other of the proper conduct of states.

Historians began to recognise this with the reintroduction of ideology into what had been largely Namierite accounts of East India Company politics. Noted also, at the institutional level, were the Company’s increasing regularity of process, its concern for legality, and its more systematic records. The Company began to profess rationality and benevolence. It sought to govern on the basis of information and analysis, as in the surveys, measurements, and reports required of the Blechyndens.¹² Thus it generated expectations, including ethical conduct and an *esprit de corps*. In practice, the Company’s structure, procedures, and terms of employment were still quite some way from the ideal of a modern government or corporation; but they had started to approach that ideal, in order to meet the challenges of administering vast territories and to rehabilitate the Company with the British elite.

The Lottery Committee’s records throw light on the difference in the norms of governance between the old school of the Calcutta

magistrates and the new breed of Company administrators, the latter not merely being 'achievers' in the sense that projects had to be conceived and completed on time but who were also disinclined to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors in the way they went about their work generally. One example which showed up the sharp contrast between the 'professional' work ethics of the new administrators and those of the old school was the performance of Charles Trower, Collector of 24-Parganas and a very senior member of the 'civil service' who was a member of the Lottery Committee from its inception till the very end. Being appointed a writer in March 1796, by 1842 he had become the fourth 'seniormost' officer by length of service in the Bengal establishment; yet, in terms of responsibility, he was just Civil Auditor. This is comment enough on his 'utility' to the Governor-General in Council. In fact, one has to read the resonating innuendoes in the letters written by the Government to the committee to gauge the true depth of the annoyance with which the former viewed the 'misdeeds' of the Collector, the message sometimes being as direct as it could be in the circumstances (for instance, when a project estimate prepared by Trower was overridden by that of a much junior member of the committee).¹³

It would, of course, be naïve to suggest that the Lottery Committee alone put an end to the 'corrupt' practices of the magistrates by stripping the latter of their powers in matters connected with the development of the city (in fact, they were still responsible for the repair of roads and drains, watering the streets, etc.). The influence of the magistrates had been reined in, but what of the entire body of employees under them (native, Eurasian and European) who had become accustomed to a way of functioning where profiteering was the norm? The new breed of senior Company officers had to rely on such people to get work done being fully aware that they would always be prone to corrupt behaviour. The story of Rupnarayan Ghoshal, a native employee initially attached to John