BEING URBAN:
SPACE, COMMUNITY, AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN COLONIAL CALCUTTA
(1800-1930)

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Exploring everyday urban life and urban formation in colonial Calcutta, this dissertation investigates the molding of urban communities through the construction of space. At the heart of this dissertation are the paras, or the neighborhoods of Calcutta that offer an on-the-ground view of colonial urbanism. Breaking from much of the previous urban constitution of scholarship on South Asia that treats the city as a mere site for politics, economics, and culture, this dissertation explores the para as a socio-spatial configuration, both shaping and shaped by historical actions. Through a close study of its spaces, this dissertation moves away from doctrinal analysis to understand what people thought urbanization was, and how these ideas informed their everyday lives. Going beyond the study of maps and town plans, usual in studies of colonial urbanism, this dissertation then reconstructs a city born in the perceptions of men and women who lived in its spaces.

Locating urbanism in the everyday spaces of the para, this dissertation argues that the management of urban space was central to the crafting of urban middle class, or bhadralok, identity. In the early twentieth century, bhadraloks invented a new code of Hindu spatial hygiene as their everyday tactic to resist the city-making efforts of the state. This new science of hygiene informed their supervision of the para, reconfiguring its spaces. Exploring the bhadralok government in the para, this dissertation reveals ideas of development that manifested as interventions in conduct.
It argues that in the bhadralok discourses on the city, urbanism was as much a bodily process as it was a spatial intervention. Employing Hindu spatial hygiene, they reordered the spaces of their para, while also trying to discipline the speech, conduct, and sexuality of fellow city dwellers.

This dissertation consists of four chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 describe the authoritarian town planning initiatives of the state, and the gradual fomenting of everyday resistance in the para. Chapters 3 and 4, show the ways in which the para molded the bhadralok identity, and was, in turn, molded by it.
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NOTES ON GEOGRAPHY AND CONVENTIONS

I have used Calcutta (now Kolkata) according to the British definitions of the territory as reflected in surveys and municipal laws of the period. In that sense, Calcutta in Chapter 1 is different from Calcutta in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. I have described (in endnotes) the exact geography that I am referring to, when I say Calcutta. I have done that when introducing the city for the first time in each chapter.

All Bengali words are in italics, e.g. *bhadralok*, *adda*, etc. I have used upper case plain text for festivals: Durga Puja.

For the names of Indian neighborhoods, I have used their Bengali forms and not the colonial variants that appear in official reports, e.g. Barra Bazaar and not Burra Bazaar, Bagh Bazaar and not Baug Bazaar. The names of neighborhoods are also in upper case plain text.

*Para* in this dissertation is both a space and a community. For example, *the bhadraloks sanitized their para*, as well as, *the bhadraloks schooled their para in hygiene.*
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CBC</td>
<td>Calcutta Building Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIT</td>
<td>Calcutta Improvement Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EIC</td>
<td>East India Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSS</td>
<td>Harijan Sevak Sangh</td>
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<tr>
<td>WBSA</td>
<td>West Bengal State Archives</td>
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Introduction

Barra Bazaar is a bustling business district in north Calcutta. The Marwaris, rich Indian traders, live here and own most of the shops. As early as the eighteenth century, they had moved from the Marwar region of Rajasthan to take part in the lively cotton trade of Bengal. They settled at first in Murshidabad, a city that housed the majestic courts and palaces of the Nawab of Bengal. Later, in 1757, when the British defeated the Nawab in a hotly contested battle at Palashi, they moved to Calcutta. In Barra Bazaar, their houses, shops, and warehouses packed the streets.

In 1911, the colonial state commissioned an Improvement Trust to clear street congestion and improve the health of Calcutta. Describing Barra Bazaar as the most congested part of the city, the Trust called for its radical restructuration.

The Trust appointed Patrick Geddes, a Scottish town planner, to clear congestion in Barra Bazaar. Geddes was at the time leading a town planning movement both in India, and Europe. He argued that new cities should preserve the spaces of the old. He also explained that the needs of city dwellers should inform town plans. Planning Barra Bazaar, he wrote:

The localization and grouping of business interests into different quarters gives a familiar character to Indian and other old cities. But this is often supposed to be an old world survival in the modern world of go as you please. Yet this view is not really the modern. It is itself a survival of the confusion in introducing the railways and mechanical revolution and their upsetting of the old order and industry…the struggle to replace that which it supersedes goes on.

Geddes tried to preserve the existing spatial patterns of Barra Bazaar in his plans for the region. He argued that as town planners produced more inclusive plans -
integrating the region and the people - the town planning movement grew stronger.\textsuperscript{3}

The progress and growing efficiency of the town planning movement has been increasingly associated with local and city surveys... they give particular attention to housing, and this of each and every class, but perhaps especially of the people, since this has hitherto been most neglected.\textsuperscript{4}

Scholars, however, have argued that Geddes’ plans were colonial tools to control popular unrest.\textsuperscript{5} Indeed, in several of his plans, Geddes had advised against demolitions not because these inconvenienced the people, but because these led to radicalism and unrest. Nevertheless, in the backdrop of the Trust’s authoritarian town plans, he showed innovation in trying to find out the needs of the people, and accommodate these in his plans.

In a similar way, this dissertation examines the role of the people in producing urban space. Going beyond describing the colonial city as a container for political and economic activities, I argue that it was a socio-spatial configuration, both shaping and shaped by historical actions. In such efforts, my work explores an urbanism born in the perceptions of men and women who lived in its spaces. Rather than analyzing maps and town plans, usual in studies of colonial urbanism, this dissertation examines how urbanism impacted a culture, that is, how people experienced urbanism, and how they utilized this knowledge in their everyday lives. To explore the contributions of the people in crafting their city, my work investigates the everyday spaces of colonial Calcutta’s neighborhoods, or the para.

Locating urbanism in the everyday spaces of Calcutta’s para, this dissertation offers an on-the-ground view of colonial urbanism. An analysis of the para helps me to narrate the hidden stories of the city: \textit{What did the colonial state hope to achieve in}
planning Calcutta? How did the people appropriate these plans? And how does this inform our understandings of empire, colonialism, and nationalism? I argue that a close study of the colonial city reveals urbanism as a complex concept with multiple layers of meanings; it meant different things for different people and at different times.

While urbanism shaped the language of contestation between the colonizers and the nationalists, its everyday variant remained very different. Ordinary people in their daily lives employed urban space to mold brand new identities that helped them to inhabit the rapidly changing spaces of the city. These new identities also helped them to negotiate a state that cared little for the people. In crafting these identities, and in safeguarding their properties from state acquisition, the city dwellers did not seek nationalist mediation. In fact, on several instances, they resisted the nationalist spatial imaginations. For example, even when the Swarajists, the nationalists who advanced ideas of self-government, became municipal authorities, urban middle class Bengalis resisted their city making efforts in the para. Standing firm against the Swarajists, they explained urban space in new ways and assumed fresh modes of self-expression. In other words, para represented a space that was organic, contingent on the habits of the people, and beyond the colonial and nationalist imaginations of the city.\(^6\)

In such arguments, my work is influenced by Henri Lefebvre’s contention that geographical space, landscape, and property are cultural, and have a history of change. More than discussing a particular theory of social space, Lefebvre examined struggles over the meaning of space and considered how relations across territories were given cultural meaning.\(^7\) In the process, he established the importance of “lived” grassroots experiences and understandings of geographical space as fundamentally social.
In Calcutta, *paras* or neighborhoods are more than geographic spaces: these are spatial communities with kin like ties. Here urbanism follows a route different from those determined by the state or the town planners. Modeled after village *paras*, the earliest *paras* of Calcutta were caste-based communities. Here neighbors lived like families, and engaged in community activities, organizing festivals and cultural programs. The *baniyas*, who were wealthy Indian merchants, shaped the early *paras*. Resisting the city making efforts of the state, they patronized its early growth, building schools, hospitals, parks, and libraries.

Preserving the social space of the village in the city, *paras* question the very idea of the “city” in South Asia. Gandhi had led nationalists in condemning the city for embodying colonialism and breaking away from villages. Nehru, on the other hand, had argued that development meant a linear progression from villages to cities. Standing in contrast to these views, the *para* clearly shows that the separation of the village and the city was never complete in India. Instead, the village seeped into the urban form, informing its spaces and becoming a key component of urban life. In such transgressions, the city and the village became inseparable.

Given Gandhi’s assertion that “the future of India lies in the villages” historians have viewed South Asia essentially as an agrarian community. Cities have featured in these histories, but only as the locus of British imperial power and the center of nationalist politics. By this, I mean that historians have studied movements in the cities, without exploring how the city shaped these movements, and was in turn shaped by them. In recent times, scholars have turned to the city to offer new understandings of politics and culture. Yet, their focus on architectural designs, town plans, and
cartographies, coupled with their descriptions of the elites, builders, and engineers have failed to describe how the ordinary people, with little access to municipal powers, lived and worked in the city.  

Breaking from much of the urban constitution of scholarship on South Asia that treats the colonial city as a mere site for politics, economics, and culture, I contribute to the emerging literature that examines the very formation of urban space and society. An exploration of the *para* allows my work to go beyond doctrinal analysis and narrate the hidden stories of Calcutta.

As early as the eighteenth century, colonial cities were fertile grounds for the flowering of European rule in the colonies. Significantly different from the mid-nineteenth century industrial cities, colonial cities embodied the colonized space of societies dominated by the early expansion of the capitalist world system. The colonial relationship required altering the productivity of the colonial society in a way that its wealth could be exported to the core nations. Colonial cities centralized this function. They housed the agencies of unequal relationship: the colonial political institutes - bureaucracies, police, and the military- and the economic structures -banks, merchants, and moneylenders, through which wealth drained from the colony to the core.

By the late eighteenth century, colonial Calcutta represented a similar urban form. Ethnic, social, and cultural groups zoned its spaces into white and black towns. The white town was the part of the city inhabited by the representatives of the colonizing society. The black town, on the other hand, was where the Bengalis lived. Here they built streets, huts, schools, and temples that displayed structural designs different from the white town.
Segregating physical space into its racial components, the spatial dyad of white/black town also inscribed space with cultural meanings. Colonial surveys and reports described these spaces in ways that rationalized the European presence in the colonies. In these discourses, wide streets, modern sewers, parks, gaslights, and bungalows comprised a “modern” white town. In sharp contrast, “narrow dingy streets, faulty sewers, and filthy houses”\textsuperscript{12} shaped a “backward” black town. These descriptions crafted new hierarchies in space that placed the white over the black, or capital over pre-capital.

As Timothy Mitchell has argued, the colonial production of knowledge worked to “enframe” the colonies: ordering and controlling the reality of the other (ruled).\textsuperscript{13} It pitted the colonizers against the ruled, creating binaries of rational/irrational, modern/backward, civilized/savage, order/ chaos, clean/unclean, and in the context of space, white/black towns. Visually representing the clean and unclean, the black/white town delivered a message more political than cultural. Living in the white town, the British emerged as clean, hygienic, and therefore, civilized. They pointed to the non-white colonials living in “filthy” black towns, and argued that only a new spatial discipline could civilize these spaces, and their inhabitants.

Rooted in this racialized view of space, colonial town plans refracted British claims of cultural supremacy. Town planners preserved the dyad of white/black towns, and through it, reinforced the binaries of civilized/savage. These efforts, however, were far from successful. Town planning remained a contested act, mediated and adapted by the city dwellers. The city dwellers utilized and rejected the town plans both at the realm of representation\textsuperscript{14} and its actual physical manifestation\textsuperscript{15}. Their efforts dismantled
boundaries that separated the colonizer from the ruled, the old city from the new, and tradition from modernity.

Adding to this rich history of colonial cities, this dissertation builds the portrait of a colonial city as it was shaped by the British rulers and experienced by indigenous inhabitants. In the mid nineteenth century, Calcutta did not simply grow in size and buildings, but also housed new groups of city dwellers. Viewing the city in different ways, these groups created panoply of images strikingly different from each other. This dissertation reconstructs the metropolis of the middling groups – salaried, office-going, English educated Bengali men, or the *bhadraloks*\(^{16}\) – their social status hovering between the city’s wealthy and the upper echelons of the workers.

Although *bhadraloks* were a dominant social group in colonial Calcutta, historians are divided over describing this group. J.H. Broomfield first engaged in a Weberian analysis to describe *bhadraloks* as a status group associated with certain cultural and social values.\(^{17}\) Cambridge historiography reinforced this view, suggesting that the *bhadraloks* were upper class Bengali men who collaborated with the British for profit. This meant that when the state did not reward them, and collaboration failed, they retaliated by shaping nationalism in their writings.\(^{18}\) In a similar way, questioning the Bengal renaissance, a social reform movement in the early twentieth century Bengal, Marxist historians also described *bhadraloks* as upper class Bengali men. In their critique of the renaissance, they pointed to the *bhadralok* biases of the movement.\(^{19}\) This led to the Marxist revaluation of the works of Bengali icons. For instance, revisiting the writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Marxist scholars traced elitism and a narrow view of society in these.
Going back to the question who the bhadraloks were, in the 1980s a new scholarship, the subaltern studies collective, argued the need to re-read the history of the bhadraloks. Moving away from “Stalinist left practices of the Communist parties and its failures to breach the hold of the nationalist ideology” the subaltern school separated political from cultural nationalism. According to them, while political nationalism sought to challenge the notion of “colonial difference” in the outer realm, cultural nationalism maintained it (reformed and reshaped) in the inner realm. Bhadraloks then emerged as the leaders of the inner realm.

Contributing to this scholarship, this dissertation explores the city as a cultural landscape that shaped bhadralok identity. I argue that the urban management of space was central to the crafting of this identity. By the late nineteenth century, the rapidly changing spaces of Calcutta were no longer in tune with the caste and religious practices of the Hindu Bengalis. Instead, the growing metropolis facilitated an inter-mixing of caste and religion. Within these shifting spaces of the city, bhadralok efforts to preserve their religion and caste practices configured their identities in new ways. They now emerged as Hindu sanitarians, authoring Hindu customs of spatial hygiene that set new standards of bhadra spaces and behavior.

I argue that a shift of focus from the nation to the city can offer a new history of middle-class knowledge-making elites as a challenge to the legitimacy of the nation-state. In asserting their authority in the city, the urban middle classes invented a new rational order, hoping to employ sanitation, clean streets, and public parks to mark their difference from the working classes. In such efforts, they offered a critique of nationalist expectations of the nation, pointing past cohesion. Instead, they engaged in an urban
management of space that emphasized their difference from the lower castes, and indigent city dwellers.

For instance, besides their English education, and government jobs, bhadralks also took pride in their cleanliness. Their clean bodies, spotless houses, clean speech (free of expletives) and a clean consciousness reflected bhadra ethics. Their sense of hygiene marked them as different from the lower castes, who they argued, had the “filthiest” of houses and bodies. Looking beyond the nationalist imagery of unity, they engaged in a mimetic projection of the colonial categories of clean/unclean and civilized/savage to mark their difference from the lower classes/castes.

To this end, hygiene was also at the heart of the autonomous government of the bhadralks in their para. Here they constituted voluntary health associations, scout camps, clinics, and led sanitation campaigns to supervise the health of their para.

Any description of bhadralks that does not mention their associational life in the para is indeed incomplete. Their engagement in the para clubs, addas (long informal conversations), football matches, and Durga Puja was what made their identity distinct. In the late nineteenth century, bhadralks were the wellspring of a new culture that celebrated literature, music, and the arts, not simply of Bengal, but that of the world. English education and an explosion of the print culture provided them with the necessary knowledge. They met at their para clubs - a room in the para - to discuss literature, music, and politics. These addas, informal conversations, produced a brand of intellectualism central to the bhadralok identity.

Essentially male centric, gatherings at the clubs shaped bhadralok camaraderie that reinforced kin like ties and facilitated their government in the para. As members of
an extended family, they worked together for the uplift of their para, constituting health associations and organizing sanitation campaigns, blood donation drives, religious festivals, sports tournaments, and musical evenings.

Through these events, the clubs reinforced the social rule of the bhadraloks in the para. Social rule meant that the bhadraloks used a code of unwritten laws and customs to govern their para. Different from the laws drafted by the state, bhadralok ideas of fairness approved these laws. These unwritten laws were instrumental in crafting norms of proper behavior in the para. The bhadraloks deployed these to advise the para dwellers in speech, conduct, and sexuality fit for the city.

Exploring the bhadralok social rule in the para, my work departs from the existing social histories of the city that describe urbanization as a structural intervention. Instead, my work reveals spatial transitions effected through interventions in bodily conduct. I argue that in the bhadralok discourses on spatial hygiene, ideas of urbanity manifested as interventions in conduct. Targeting spaces and bodies, they shaped a pedagogic program to train para dwellers in conduct fit for the city. The clubs, parks, health association, and festivals of the para carried out this training, educating men and women in behavior appropriate for the city. Similar to the nationalist spatial imagination, this pedagogic program endorsed the normativity of Hindu spatial customs in the city. But at the heart of this pedagogic program were bhadralok assertions of “middle class values of hygiene” that overshadowed nationalist city making efforts.

**The Colonial City Calcutta**

Calcutta forms the backdrop of my dissertation for a number of reasons. At the very outset, every street in the city embeds layers of history. Landmarks of architectural
The city of Calcutta took shape in the wake of the East India Company (EIC) trade in cotton and silk in eighteenth century Bengal. Three villages – Gobindpur, Sutanuti, and Kalikata – earlier occupied the space where the city now stands. The Company engaged in a prosperous trade with the Bengali merchants at Sutanuti, the northernmost tip of the riverside villages. In 1698, to secure this trade, it bought zamindari (tax collecting) rights from Azim-Us-Shan, the grandson of the then Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. Following from this, the Company-state ordered town improvements to thread together the villages to facilitate trade and tax-collection. They also built a factory and a port along the river Hooghly. In 1757, the EIC defeated the Nawab of Bengal at Palashi and headquartered their business and commercial offices at Calcutta.

The selection of Calcutta as the center of government exemplifies the rupture that British colonialism brought with it. As the nucleus of the colonial rule, the waterfront city of Calcutta embodied new ambitions of the British. When the EIC first took part in the cotton trade of Bengal, Murshidabad, a city north of Calcutta, was the vibrant center of commerce. In 1704, Murshid-Quli-Khan, Nawab of Bengal, had moved his Dewani Daftar (office) from Dacca to Murshidabad. With three consecutive Islamic dynasties ruling over Murshidabad, it housed exquisite palaces, mosques, and splendid gardens. When the British defeated Siraj-Ud-Daullah in 1757, they did little to preserve the city of Murshidabad. Instead, they turned to Calcutta for its strategic location along the river Hooghly.
While most Mughal cities were inland, colonial cities grew along the oceans. In Calcutta, the British built a port to connect their trade with networks of global trade. They also cleared the area near Lal Dighi, a water tank, transforming it into the “city center”. This region now housed business offices and credit unions. Located at the “city center” these offices reflected the power that commerce would eventually hold over the colonial city.

This new landscape touched the lives of the city dwellers, weaving together a stunningly complex web of social groups. As social historians have pointed out, comprador *rajas* or local kings dominated the Indian neighborhoods. Working as *banias* for the EIC, and also engaged in a prosperous real estate business, they represented a culmination of processes that characterized the eighteenth century regional political economy. They were a class of intermediaries who acted as links between pre-colonial and colonial state systems. Their dominance in the colonial city, their accumulation of wealth, and their engagement in real estate provided evidence that they, in fact, benefitted from the colonial rule. As historians have argued, the Company rule, in turn, grafted itself on the networks of indigenous economy through their collaboration with these *rajas*.

That the real estate business of the *rajas* centered mostly on the Indian neighborhoods puts to question the nature of their collaboration with the Company. Spaces of the colonial city clearly reveal segregated spheres of British and Indian influence. It brings to light comparable town-building processes, one that the comprador *rajas* initiated, and the other that the EIC, and later the state, carried out. Indeed, as the histories of colonial town planning show, from the earliest days of their rule in India, the
British acted as dominant agents of urban and architectural change, invading and trying to restructure Indian neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{32}

In addition, a close analysis of town planning reveals that the city is not organized physically, but also culturally. City-space embodies a wide variety of negotiations between the state, planners, communities, and individuals. These negotiations can take varied forms: joint enterprises\textsuperscript{33}, joint production of knowledge\textsuperscript{34}, the impact of the heterogeneity of colonizers on the built form\textsuperscript{35}, the limits of the tradition–modernity model\textsuperscript{36} and the inadequacy of the black town/white town model\textsuperscript{37}. Adding to this is the fact that the meaning of public space in South Asia is very different from that of the European cities. The Habermasian notion of public space does not apply to South Asian cities; kinship and family ties extend to the public space, blurring boundaries between the public and private.\textsuperscript{38}

This idea of difference in spatial practices was in fact at the core of anti colonial nationalism. Upholding difference, the nationalists demanded increased autonomy in governing their city, and through it, their country. Nationalist resistance to colonial authority followed two different arcs: while one group resisted colonial town improvements, the other tried to appropriate colonial spaces: streets, buildings, parks, and squares. This group pointed to the white town to show what freedom could bring.\textsuperscript{39} This marked not simply spatial, but an ideational appropriation, clearly showing that the postcolonial state would echo the colonial.\textsuperscript{40}

Indian participation in local self-government, or the municipality, further reinforced ideas of difference. Debates at the municipal corporation saw the nationalists employing the rhetoric of difference to engage in extended debates with the British.\textsuperscript{41} With time,
they fought and won municipal elections. In the 1920s, municipal elections provided the nationalists with a chance to challenge colonial authority at an institutional level. Many historians have in fact traced the success of the nationalists in municipal administration to their eventual triumph in initiating the processes of decolonization.⁴²

This dissertation moves away from the realms of institutional or high politics to situate the autonomous government of the bhadraloks in the everyday spaces of their para. Unlike the political, or the extraordinary, the para represents the space of the silent, mundane, and ordinary acts. Yet these ordinary acts were extraordinary: ordinary people – schoolteachers, government officers, and clerks – devised new tactics to resist state intervention and carved their autonomous government in the para. At the heart of their government were new ideas of space and spatial hygiene. As I argue, these ideas of space were in fact their tactics to remold a city space unresponsive to their religion and caste practices. In other words, they used space to “turn the actual order of things to their own ends”.⁴³

**Planning the Colonial City**

The key question that drives the study of the British Empire is *why did the British endorse liberal ideas of equality and liberty, and also engage in building colonies?* The reason, of course, is that they did not view the ruled as equals: they justified their presence in the colonies as an effort to civilize a backward and savage population. To this end, they took upon themselves the task of introducing the principles of liberalism in the colonies.

English Utilitarianism, an offshoot of liberalism, rationalized the British rule in India. Finding expression first in the works of Jeremy Bentham, a British philosopher and
jurist, utilitarianism drove to ensure the greatest good of the greatest numbers. In the context of the colonial rule in India, English utilitarianism, however, served an altogether different purpose. Describing themselves as benevolent masters, the British decided what meant “good” for the Indians. To this end, they pledged to liberate Indians from the “bondage of despotic rulers, archaic economic relations, and religion steeped in superstition”.

Where did the colonial city feature in British utilitarianism? I argue that visually producing difference, spaces of the colonial city empowered British utilitarianism. Colonial surveys of these cities shaped regimes of discourse and representation: these located filth and backwardness in indigenous neighborhoods and called for its scientific management. Colonial health reports, in particular, located in city space the elements of progress and backwardness. In building cities, the British took pride in gifting the colonies vehicles to quicken the pace of their journey to progress. Cities, they argued, would provide the savage population of the colonies with the environment required for scientific and moral growth.

In the first half of the dissertation, I have explored a public health discourse that emerged alongside colonial town plans in nineteenth century Calcutta. At the heart of this discourse was a selective representation of Indian neighborhoods that turned these spaces into the “other” of progress, or the “backward”. I point to the general style of representation in these texts, and the use of photographs, through which health officers framed the geography of backwardness. I argue that these representations targeted Indian neighborhoods, translating them into “black towns”.


Existing scholarship on the colonial city has described the black town as the traditional city pre-dating colonialism but arising out of the establishment of the colonial urban settlement. I argue that more than geographic space, the black town was a discursive construct, an incarnation of backwardness that kept the engines of British liberalism running in India.

In fact, we can locate in the spatial dyad of black/white town the early formulations of present day developmentalism. John Hutnyk’s study, for instance, has explored the construction of Calcutta in recent development discourses, analyzing the technologies of representation that frame Calcutta as city of decay.\textsuperscript{46} He then shows how this politics of representation reinforce and replicate the conditions of contemporary cultural and economic inequality.

In a similar way, I argue that the language of backwardness made “British liberalism durable”\textsuperscript{47} in the colonies. It offered the British the right to invent difference, and manage it to produce progress. Descriptions of irrational space empowered colonial policies of segregation\textsuperscript{48}, inequality\textsuperscript{49}, and demolition\textsuperscript{50}. By the late nineteenth century, concerns of public health authorized the state to commission even more radical improvements. In the wake of cholera and plague, the health officers invaded Indian houses, inspected its interiors, and examined individual inhabitants. They described these houses as “plague spots” and ordered complete demolition.

Explaining the ideologies that informed colonial health policies, Mark Harrison has argued that we need to move away from the rigid dichotomy of “authoritarian, paternalistic” state versus “liberal and decentralist” to a paradigm that would accommodate both.\textsuperscript{51} Harrison sees in the act of implementing colonial health policies
their restrictions. This is in tune with David Arnold’s argument that western medicine was actually a battleground between the colonizers and the ruled, fashioned in response to local needs and Indian conditions.\footnote{52}

In a similar way, the execution of town improvements was fraught with differences and evoked a wide variety of responses. The second chapter of this dissertation examines the ways in which \textit{bhadraloks} in Calcutta responded to authoritarian town improvements. I argue that at first, they saw in the broad, tree-lined streets and open spaces the road to progress. With the state engaging in indiscriminate acquisitions and demolitions of private property, they withdrew their support. Challenging colonial town improvements, they crafted new identities to resist the state. To this end, the \textit{bhadraloks} drew on the scriptures to invent a new code of Hindu spatial hygiene.

\textbf{Bhadralok Sanitarians}

With Calcutta transforming to a major metropolitan center, new administrative offices and business centers came up in the city. The state now required a new workforce to staff these offices. English was the language of both verbal and written communication in these offices. This meant that the British had to train the Bengalis in English to employ them. In 1835, the state introduced a new system of education in the English language, with the hope that the educated Bengalis could now provide them with cheap labor as clerks and low-level administrative staff. Additionally, as Charles Trevelyan, a civil servant noted, “[T]hey will then cease to desire and aim at independence on the old Indian footing ... and a long continuance of our present connection with India will even be assured to us”.\footnote{53}
English education offered the British a chance to impose their values, beliefs, assumptions and tastes on the Bengalis that were “vital in the process of sociopolitical control”. Further, Horace Wilson, British civil servant, emphasized the need to “initiate them [Indians] into our literature, particularly at an early age, and get them to adopt feelings and sentiments from our standard writers, can we make an impression on them, and effect any considerable alteration in their feelings and notions”.

By 1835, the British had successfully introduced English education in India. The Indian elite welcomed the advent of English education thinking that it would be their window to a world that was rational and culturally and morally superior. Instead, as Ania Loomba has argued, English education offered “a programme of building a new man who would feel himself to be a citizen of the world while the very face of the world was being constructed in the mirror of the dominant culture of the West”.

Without doubt, the new education played a critical role in reconstituting the mental world of the Bengalis. Besides providing them with new jobs, it also introduced them to new etiquettes, manners, styles of dressing, and crafted new norms of respectability. English-educated Bengalis were ‘bhadrá’: refined, courteous, and disciplined in their behavior. At the same time, they worked within a system that tried to regulate them, rather than provide them with the knowledge that could set their minds free. At their workplace, they experienced the rigors of their chakri: extreme discipline of time, low pay, and regular discrimination that ultimately made them lose hope in the emancipating powers of English education.

As English educated middle classes, bhadraloks, however, were different from the western bourgeoisie. The “bourgeoisie”, as Engels had described was “the class of
modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labor”. In Calcutta, *bhadraloks* culturally invented through English education, were structurally limited as they lacked a basis for economic expansion within colonial economic control. Thus it was not a class as it made no attempts at social transformation. Instead, the existing social structure mutated itself to constitute the new middle class. The requirement of English education to belong to the hallowed circle of the *bhadralok* s meant that upper caste Indian men with traditional access to education exploited the opportunities and became the middle class.

This shaky foundation of the *bhadraloks* meant that they routinely devised new ways to define themselves. These attempts at self-definition saw them emphasizing their difference from the British. Already the discriminatory work place had forced them to look inward. For that reason, ideals of domesticity informed the new identities that they crafted for themselves. Endorsing new ideas of domesticity, *bhadraloks* emerged as the custodian of a new culture rooted in tradition. Drawing on the world of spirituality and domesticity, they shaped an indigenous space that the British could not penetrate.

It was in this world of culture, the well-guarded domain of the domestic that cultural nationalism first took shape. *Bhadraloks* had by then separated their world into two: the ‘outer’ and the ‘inner’. Science, technology, rational forms of economic organization and modern methods of statecraft, which had given the European countries the strength to subjugate non-European people, simply belonged to the outer domain. The spiritual, and the home, on the other hand, comprised the inner. As the *bhadraloks* drew on Hindu religion to define themselves as different from the British, anti colonial nationalism took shape in the world of the inner.
Meanwhile *bhadralok* associations and literary productions shaped a new public sphere. Different from the Habermasian public sphere that was instrumental in facilitating democratic transitions in Europe, the public sphere in Calcutta extended the ideas of anti-colonial nationalism.\(^{62}\) Far from encouraging democratic exchanges, *bhadraloks* repurposed the public sphere to empower the Hindu nation. The public sphere strategically filtered all other views, only extending anti-colonial nationalism. To borrow Frietag’s term, these “public arenas”, were then different from the public sphere.\(^{63}\) Unlike public sphere, public arenas facilitated popular participation towards the making of the Hindu nation.

This dissertation goes beyond the inner/outer divides of cultural nationalism to focus on the city, and show how its spaces crafted the *bhadralok* identity. I argue that urban management of the *para* was key to the shaping of the *bhadralok* identity in the early twentieth century. In such arguments, I retrieve an identity grounded in the landscape\(^{64}\). With the city, rather than the nation as the basis for my analysis, I point to middle-class actors as the source of political initiative beyond the fold of nationalism.

In the late nineteenth century, a demographic change altered the urban fabric of Calcutta. With famines ravaging the countryside, groups of villagers moved to the city. They erected huts on streets that bordered the *bhadralok paras*. This meant that the lower castes and Muslims could now live close to the *bhadralok* houses. The *bhadraloks* did not have legal powers to evict them. They therefore invented new tactics to resist the intermixing of castes in their everyday lives. To this end, they invented a new science of Hindu hygiene that brought together spatial with caste purity. These new principles of hygiene called for segregation of the “clean” *bhadraloks* from the “filthy” lower castes.
In addition, the bhadraloks carried out spatial shuddhi or sanitary campaigns to impose the laws of Hindu spatial hygiene on the lower castes. These efforts of the bhadraloks remained widely different from the city making efforts of the Swarajists, who ruled over the Municipal Corporation at the time.

**The Everyday Space of the Para**

Although cities remain at the heart of historical inquiries in South Asia, scholars have paid little attention to its spaces. This means that historians have studied movements in the city, without exploring how the city shaped these movements, and was, in turn, shaped by them. Instead, they have contextualized a subject through its immediate temporal history, leaving out its geographical position.

As hegemonic time has represented history, what Henri Lefebvre called “monumental space”\(^{65}\) represents space in the existing scholarship on colonial cities. This space is either sacred or belongs to authority: religious or governmental buildings, offices, boulevards, monuments, houses of the elites, and landmark architectures. They narrate a selective history, unveiling the stories of the state, elites, and nationalists. They do not explore the heterogeneous past of the city. Addressing this gap in scholarship, this dissertation explores the ambiguous, elusive, and undocumented components of history and space: everyday practices, displacements, un-written rules, identities, and marginalized populations.

Lefebvre, the most prominent theorist of everyday, described “everydayness” as a soul-destroying feature of modernity. He argued that capitalist workplaces, like the factory, alienated people from their true conditions and kept them confined in a state of false consciousness.\(^ {66}\) Everyday life was then marked by routine, repetition, and
dreariness that kept this consciousness intact. Michel De Certeau, who further developed the idea of everyday, described people employing tactics to creatively adapt to the everyday. He therefore found in the everyday, leeway of redemption. He argued that individuals could subvert authority in their everyday lives by breaking small rules, rather than partaking in grand political uprisings.

Likewise, my dissertation focuses on everyday life that shaped the contours of the *para* and kept the landscape under constant production. I argue that space is ultimately social in nature: it is a product of human interactions, *produced*, rather than *planned*. It takes shape depending on the ways in which city dwellers adapt, engage, and experience it. In such appropriations, they constantly remake space, and also their identities. These processes do not always overlap the nationalist spatial imaginations. As I show, more than the language of nationalism, public spaces of the *para* such as the park or a club often became central to the *bhadralok* identity. Understanding how and why this happened enables us to make sense of how the group of the *bhadralok* functioned.

At the same time, the everyday in early twentieth century Calcutta was not beyond the influences of larger historical forces: colonialism, nationalism, the mobilization of Hindu identities for anti-colonial nationalism, and the opening of local self-government in municipalities. What the *para* offers then, is a lens to understand how these forces were implemented and appropriated at the local level of the everyday. I argue that the *para* did not always mark an alternative to high politics. Instead, it embedded cultural regulation and political expropriation in everyday life, carefully integrating the micro with the macro. The *para* then is the window to understand the
unique ability of men and women to employ multiple and competing voices and discourses to formulate and reshape their daily lives.

As Ranajit Guha has argued, everyday life in the colonial city was in fact a “truncated everyday”. It could hardly find expression within the disciplines of the colonial rule. He explained that the bhadralok experienced the rigors of colonial time and discipline for the most part of his day. This left very little time for the everyday to take shape. Guha located in festivals, the suspension of colonial order, and the subsequent maturing of the everyday.

What I am arguing is that everyday life in the para clearly shows the creative potential of individuals in accepting, rejecting, and remolding dominant voices (both colonialism and nationalism) of the city. In other words, the para embodied the everyday that existed beyond the disciplines of the workplace. At the very outset, the para evades administrative and legal categories and spatial conventions. Its spaces cannot be plotted on a map. State authorities and town planners do not plan its spaces. The earliest para, more than geographic space, was a caste-based spatial community. It had its own organizational pattern, decision making processes, and political structure made up of people who shared kin like ties, selected leaders, and granted authority. In other words, paras were self-governing spaces where colonial discipline always remained suspended.

Second, resisting state interventions, paras preserved the social space of the village in the city. The earliest paras took shape under the banias who had moved to Calcutta from the countryside of Bengal. In ordering their paras, they tried to recreate their villages. The sense of place then took a nostalgic aura: caste-based neighborhoods, a tree next to a pond, a temple beside it, huts that were closely built, markets that
resembled the village *haat*, and green fields for the people to meet and the young boys to play. These offered a telos, a meaning beyond the merely accidental. To quote Ashis Nandy's words, “in the city by default and under duress. Home has to have a touch of the pastoral, even when a poisoned village has caused the homelessness.”

Further, actions not considered acts of resistance in normal times became so in the colonial context. Benign acts in the *para*, such as organizing health shows, running literary or music clubs, holding religious festivals, sports and competitions signaled defiance and persistent opposition to the government. The *bhadralok* government in the *para* then constituted what De Certau has argued as the “maneuver within the enemy’s field of vision ... and within enemy territory ... [that] operates in isolated actions, blow by blow”.

Indeed, the everyday spaces of the *para* facilitated the social rule of the upper caste *banias* and *bhadraloks*. In the *bania* led *para*, *dals* or caste-based associations provided social security to its members. Before they appealed to the state, *para* dwellers approached the *banias* for resolving disputes. The *dals* resolved disputes keeping an eye on the caste of the individuals. Usually an influential Bengali presided over the *dal* and became the *dalapati* or leader of the *dal*. He advised the members of his *dal* on both public and private matters, including marriage, property, and spirituality.

By the late nineteenth century, *bhadralok* s formed their own clubs to arbitrate disputes and provide security to the *para*. These clubs marked a break with the oligarchic character of the *bania* led *paras*, and the culmination of the *bhadralok* government. At the clubs, while discussing literature, *bhadraloks* also advised each other on matters of property and marriage. In addition, the clubs arranged for health shows and scout camps.
When faced with strict town improvements, they also drafted new strategies to resist the state.

This dissertation argues that in the bhadralok government in the para, crafting of Hindu identities were everyday tactics to resist the state. This did not involve nationalist mediation. Instead, faced with authoritarian town improvements of the state, the bhadraloks repeatedly invested their properties with religious meaning and crafted new identities for themselves. At this time, a Hindu identity protected them from the repressive land acquisitions of the state. Served with evacuation notices, the bhadraloks described their property as debutter, or invested in the deity, and therefore inalienable. Para dwellers provided evidence that the debutter was in fact public, which meant that it brought together the para as a Hindu community. To avoid sectarian uprisings, the state then abstained from acquiring these properties.

Partha Chatterjee’s work has shown how the categories of the inner (spiritual) and outer (statecraft, science, etc.) contrasted each other to shape a patriarchy instrumental in empowering the bhadraloks to voice the nation. In the everyday space of the para, the spiritual, however, overlapped the material in crafting the new government of the bhadraloks. A science of Hindu spatial hygiene conferred a new level of political legitimation to the bhadralok government. Following the tenets of Hindu hygiene, they set up health associations, organized health shows, and initiated scout-training camps in their paras that sharpened their Hindu identities.

In sum, this dissertation argues that the para is a lived space, and therefore, more collective and personal than regulated monumental spaces. I have described how small everyday events in the para, such as meetings in the para clubs, health associations, anti-
spitting campaigns, scout training in the parks can be read as rich sources of new historical narratives, and resistance.

**Urbanization As a Bodily Intervention**

The conceptual weight of this dissertation lies in its ability to highlight urbanism as a cultural process set in motion by the colonial state and later appropriated by the *bhadraloks* for very different purposes. I explore improvements initiated by the *bhadraloks* that tried to shape discrete spaces and bodies in the *para*. In such efforts, my work departs from the existing social histories of the city, which describe urbanization as structural intervention, to reveal spatial transitions effected through interventions in bodily conduct. I argue that the *bhadraloks* initiated a pedagogic program in their *para* to train men and women in conduct fit for the city. Neighborhood clubs, health associations, parks, and libraries carried out this program, disciplining the speech, conduct, and sexuality of the *para* dwellers.

The “body” as a social and historical construct stands at the focus of major historical enquiries in South Asia. Scholars have argued that a close examination of the body can reveal social distinctions and class taste. Clare Anderson’s work on the history of punishment in colonial South Asia, for instance, shows how colonial reading of the bodies of convicts through tattooing, haircuts, measurements, and fingerprinting was part of the broader project of colonial domination. Anderson shows that these readings of bodies were tied to the colonial goal of ordering Indian society. In such efforts, the body provided the administrators and penologists with the text to construct criminal behavior. In a similar way, Ashwini Tambe’s work on prostitutes of Bombay shows that although the prostitute provided sexual recreation to the soldier, sailor, mill worker, and other
apparatuses of the state, the state saw her body as an anomaly and a serious problem in multiple ways. On the one hand, she threatened Victorian family norms by practicing nonmarital sex; on the other, the British viewed her as a source of venereal diseases and threat to public health. Most importantly, the constant racial anxiety of maintaining purity and avoiding miscegenation forced the prostitute to work under strict colonial gaze.

To control deviant bodies, the state then enforced stricter laws, initiating a period of severe repression. Elizabeth Kolsky has shown the state’s oppressive measures to control the Indian woman’s body in the context of intraracial rape in early colonial India. The British judges created a set of evidentiary requirements and legal decisions that were harsh on the rape victims. Implicit in these dictates were the colonial ambitions to regulate the Indian body.

This scholarship on the body provides an entry point to understand why and how the body also became the focus of the nationalists. The body emerged as the terrain for contesting colonial discipline in the nationalist discourses. The crafting of the Hindu nation intersected new physical routines that the nationalists imposed on the bodies of the Indians. This included setting new standards of fitness, diet, nutrition, and conduct. Joseph Alter has described this new brand of nationalism as a somatic nationalism. Describing the body of a wrester, he showed how reality interacted with the body as a symbol, “modern Hindu concepts of self and society are not guided by a simple notion of Cartesian mind-body duality. Rather, the whole person is regarded as a complex, multilayered indivisible synthesis of psychic, somatic, emotional, sensory, cognitive, and chemical forces.” Within this context, Alter argues that the discipline enacted upon and reflected by the bodies of wrestlers carried with them Hindu meanings.
In a similar way, Joya Chaterji’s work shows militant Hindu nationalism taking shape in akharas and gymnasiums of Calcutta. Physical training became a prominent activity in which nationalists encouraged self-discipline, the use of bamboo stave, and gymnastics alongside the celebration of Bengal’s rich history.

Existing scholarship has thus studied the body as the site of both discipline and resistance. By making a case for bhadralok improvements targeting bodies, what I suggest is a more complex dynamics of a society both undergoing and resisting change. I argue that in endorsing urbanism, the bhadraloks initiated a “civilizing processes” that marked a reduction in the use of overt physical violence and instead, increased the intensity of self-control: a process that transformed regulation from being controlled by others to one where the individual controlled herself.

At the heart of the bhadralok civilizing mission was a process of refinement. Refinement meant the suppression of intimate functions and desires, such as those relating to sex and the body. In describing refined behavior, bhadraloks clearly laid out manners, etiquette, and behavior that they thought was fit for the city. To refine the behavior of their fellow para dwellers, they emblazoned on their body new practices of Hindu diet, sexuality, and fitness. In these efforts, bodily control emerged as a bhadralok virtue, central to their quest for gentility and middle class status.

These new manners and customs then trickled down to the lower castes and immigrants. Starting in the late nineteenth century, the bhadraloks initiated shuddhi or purification campaigns to cleanse the neighborhoods of the lower castes. While carrying out these campaigns, they called attention to the insanitary spaces of these neighborhoods. This, in turn, challenged the colonial argument that all Indian
neighborhoods were “black towns”. Instead, upholding their cleanliness, the *bhadraloks* employed the colonial constructs of “black town” and “bustees” to describe the lower caste neighborhoods. As this dissertation shows, to “improve” the conditions of the lower castes, the *bhadraloks* then forced their manners, customs, tastes, and language on them. These efforts, however, was status affirming: it preserved differences between the *bhadraloks* and the poor, rather than trying to improve the conditions of the poor.

**Bustees: Spaces of Difference**

The *bustee*, or the slum, can be best described as an informal urban sprawl where the working poor live. In state surveys, literature, films, and academic writing, the term *bustee*, however, routinely invoke images of insurmountable filth. Mike Davis best articulates the idea of the *bustee* as a filth-ridden space. Davis writes that unsightly dumps of waste *always* cover the horizontal spreads of unplanned squats and shantytowns. Here, education and democratic institutes do not exist, child labor is the norm, child prostitution is commonplace, gangs and paramilitaries rule, and the people do not have access to clean water or sanitation. As examples, he points to Beirut's Quarantina and Cairo's City of the Dead and warns that “[cities] rather than being made out of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks and scrap wood”. According to Davis, this is largely due to the neoliberal restructuring of Third World urban economies that has occurred since the late 1970s, which is to say it is the fault of the World Bank and IMF, and also middle-class hegemony.

Critically appraising the ideas of urban informality, Ananya Roy’s work has questioned the ways in which scholars have viewed informality as a sign of urban decay.
Roy asserts that informal spaces do not always oppose or try to dismantle lawful spaces. Instead, informal spaces can house industrial elements that represent people’s economy. The informal then is very much a part of the formal city. In addition, slums have their own spatial patterns and democratic institutions. As Partha Chatterjee has described, a political society different from the elite civil society marks political mobilization in these spaces. He argues that when faced with state indifference, underprivileged communities often violate law and oppose civic norms of good citizenship to get hold of civic facilities.

Historicizing the space of the bustee, this dissertation argues that bustees are mutable geographies that enfolded different spaces under different regimes of power. As discriminatory colonial practices ordered the spaces of Calcutta, the British tied racialized meanings and assumptions to Indian neighborhoods. They argued that all Indian neighborhoods were immoral and chaotic, and therefore, bustees. This geography then contrasted the morally and scientifically superior European neighborhoods. Likewise, the Hindu middle classes described bustees as the neighborhoods of the working poor where mixed Hindu and Muslim practices were common. They described growing filth and insanitation in these spaces and argued the need to impose Hindu spatial customs on the bustee dwellers. This imagery reflected the earlier colonial productions of the black town, and subsequent efforts to restructure it.

I argue that instead of eliminating filth, bhadralok sanitary campaigns preserved the differences between paras and bustees. Additionally, they borrowed the colonial language of pathology to argue that bustees were the breeding grounds of disease. This trope of disease had a powerful effect in solidifying images of filthy bustees that
circulated in *bhadralok* writings. Embodying filth and disease, the *bustees* then recast *paras* as hygienic and modern spaces of the city.

This dissertation then adds to the idea of the ‘unintended city’ that Jai Sen had earlier used to describe *bustees*. He explained that there existed an unintended city of the poor within the city of the middle classes and the wealthy.\(^8^6\) The planned spaces of their city- its institutes, offices, clubs, and culture - did not overlap with the spaces of the unintended city. But at the same time, the spaces of the intended and unintended city reinforced each other. The unintended city made possible a range of services that made daily life of the intended city possible. On the other hand, the intended city grew by exploiting and depriving the unintended.

What I am contributing to this scholarship is a history of the unintended city that shows that the divide between the intended/unintended was not organic but carefully crafted by regimes of power. First the colonial state, and then the *bhadralok* s, described new spaces and populations as *bustees*. With the Hindu *bhadralok* government in the *para*, *bustees* meant city spaces inhabited by the lower castes, Muslims, and the working poor.

In 1947, the partition of Bengal forced several Hindu Bengalis to move to West Bengal. Leaving their properties behind, they came to Calcutta and settled in “refugee colonies”. The state failed to house them and their neighborhoods did not have basic civic facilities. With time, the *bhadralok* s also regarded these “colonies” as *bustees*. What followed were years of discrimination. The *bhadralok* s stayed away from the *bustees*, and also did not encourage bustee dwellers to enter their *paras*. Films like *Chhinamool*, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, and *Subrnarekha* have brilliantly captured the hardships of men and
women who moved to Calcutta after Partition and lived in the bustees. The image of their struggles to live in a city that cared little about them is the central narrative in most of these films. The cultural meanings that circulated in these films represent the growing marginalization of the bustee in the postcolonial city.

**Chapter Outline**

The dissertation consists of four chapters. The first chapter, “The Black Town: Representing Space in Nineteenth Century Calcutta”, traces the discursive production of a “black town” in colonial health reports. I argue that in the first half of the nineteenth century, the British ordered town improvements to display their racial superiority. This, in turn, rationalized their presence in Calcutta. Colonial policies changed after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. After the mutiny, the state ordered radical restructuring of the city to make future revolts impossible. Intervening in the Indian neighborhoods, they grafted improvements. Grafting was a process that eliminated cultural differences and simply tried to homogenize space. When faced with severe resistance, colonial health officers translated Indian neighborhoods as the “black town”. This discursive production took place in the health reports. Black town was the symbolic geography of Indian insanitation that the British pledged to improve. What I argue in this chapter is that the black town, more than actual physical space, was a discursive production that warranted forceful town improvements.

The second chapter “The Planned City: Calcutta Improvement Trust and the Paras” examines town improvements initiated by the Calcutta Improvement Trust in 1911. I argue that once the “black town” took shape in the colonial health reports, the Trust engaged in a radical restructuration of its spaces. Purging the Bengalis from the city
center, it forced them to move to the south. Here, it opened “suburbs” to house the evictees, but eventually sold plots of lands to wealthy Bengalis. These improvements fractured the city along racial and class lines. The chapter explores the deliberations of the Trust that took place outside law courts to show that the Trust enjoyed complete autonomy in acquiring and demolishing private properties. Following from this, I argue that the Bengali property owners invented new strategies to resist the Trust’s acquisitions of private property. To this end, they inscribed their properties with religious meanings and drummed up their para to draft petitions as Hindus. This (re) constituted the identities of the para’s dwellers, for all intents and purposes, as Hindus.

The third chapter “The Hindu City: Paras and a New Urban Community” traces colonial urbanism in the everyday spaces of Calcutta’s neighborhoods or paras. Arguing that the neighborhood, more than geographic space was a spatial community based on kin like ties, I trace its early history. I show that the patronage of the banias, or wealthy merchants shaped the first paras of Calcutta. In ordering its spaces, they preserved the social space of the village in the city. With the introduction of English education, bhadralok s replaced the banias as leaders of their para. They called for democratic transitions and endorsed an urban modernity that targeted both spaces and bodies in the para. I argue that their management of urban space crafted a new bhadralok identity, while configuring the spaces of the para in new ways.

The final chapter, “A new Black Town: Bustees and Re-Colonizing Calcutta” shows that the bhadralok ideas of urban modernity crossed the spaces of their para and informed the neighborhoods of the working poor. Pointing to a shared discourse of the bustee in colonial and bhadralok writings, I argue that the bhadralok s used this term to
describe the neighborhoods of the working poor as filthy and pathogenic. This, in turn, recast their roles as Hindu sanitarians and their paras as hygienic and modern. It also facilitated a spatial shuddhi campaign that endorsed Hindu spatial practices as normative in the city. Carrying out spatial shuddhi in neighborhoods where mixed Hindu-Muslim practices were the norm, spatial shuddhi forced the upper caste Hindu manners on the lower castes and non-Hindus.

2 Patrick Geddes. *BuraBazaar Improvement Report, 1919*
3 Ibid
4 Ibid
5 As Hellen Meller pointed out, most of the planning ideas in Geddes report were designed to inform the civic administration about their duties and stop them from causing some damages they were causing. Additionally, when Geddes was planning towns and houses keeping in mind the ancient Indian practices, the Indians had already moved on to adopt colonial styles. Helen Meller. *Patrick Geddes: Social Evolutionist and City Planner* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p.283. In contrast, Marin Beattie has argued that Geddes methods of interviewing people, surveying the houses provided the state with an insight of the ordinary, the “messy” and “dirty” practices of the everyday. Martin Beattie, "Colonial Space: Health and Modernity in Barabazaar, Kolkata." *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* (2003): 7-19.
8 A good example of this would be Rajat Kanta Ray. *Urban roots of Indian nationalism: pressure groups and conflict of interests in Calcutta City politics, 1875-1939* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1979). An excellent account of urban pressure groups in Calcutta, here the city features as a site where historical actions took place, rather than a force that molded these movements, and was, in turn, molded by it.
10 Between 1800 and 1960, the proportion of the world’s population living in cities increased by hundred percent. In both poorer and rich countries, cities marked a record increase in population. This led to a series of inquiries by the United Nations, UNESCO, and also academic scholars. Gideon Sjoberg’s then-popular dichotomization of cities according to the measure of technological inheritance failed to account for the distinctive heterogenic centers established by Europeans along the African and Asian littorals. Recognizing the limitations of a simple bifurcated image of urban society, T.G.McGee called for articulation of a discrete model of the colonial city and for systematic study of representative spaces. Meanwhile, in 1966, Gerald
Breese analyzed the urban growth and described urbanization in developing countries as “subsistence urbanization”. In a sweeping generalized study of Delhi, Breese employed urbanization as a political concept to argue that in Western urbanization, delegative, representative governments developed in cities in contrast to the non-western countries. In other words, the cities marked the transition from status to contract, or from tradition to modern. He then described subsistence urbanization in developing countries leading to individuals living in very high density, in conditions worse than the rural, lacking means of support that can offer nothing more than mere survival. What this study offers is a uniform and linear understanding of urban modernity. It does not take into consideration the diverse socio-economic conditions in which urbanization took shape in different countries of the world. According to Breese, if urbanization in a country does not meet the standards of the west, it was “subsistence”. Scholarship on cities in India in the 1970s has contested this view. Analyzing the space of colonial cities, scholars have argued that a universal law of urbanization does not exist. Different historical conditions have shaped different cities. The process of urbanization varies from region to region and depends on geographical, social and market society. Consequently, social historians have pointed to the early expansion of early capitalism and market society with colonialism, and the emergence of collaborators in colonial cities. In India, they have pointed out colonialism leading to the expansion of market in the cities. But these cities grew by accommodating the village; caste and social groups moved to the cities and emerged as urban groups. Modernity and tradition therefore were dichotomous but also informed each other. See, Gideon Sjoberg, The preindustrial city, past and present (Glencoe: Free Press, 1960) 24-25. T.G.McGee, “The Rural-Urban Continuum Debate: The Preindustrial City and Rural-Urban Migration”, Pacific Viewpoint, Vol. 5, (1964): 159-181.Gerald Breese, Urbanization in newly developing countries, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 4-5. For a counterview of Breese, see S.N.Mukherjee, Calcutta: Essays in Urban History, (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1977), 2.

11 Led by Janet Abu Lughod, scholars have pointed to deep social, economic, and political divides in cities that experienced colonial domination. These divides did not find mention in the historiographies of western cities. Anthony D.King has argued in a similar way that colonial urban development required formulations to identify core values, patterns of behavior, and institutions that influenced sociospatial forms of town and cities established by European colonial authorities. He described that those centers should not be seen as replicas of settlements and societies in the West. Instead, they represent unique and complex, “culture contact situations” incorporating cultural, economic and technological elements from both the colonizers and the ruled. See, Janet Abu Lughod, “Tale of two cities: The Origins of Modern Cairo” Comparative Studies in Society and History, Vol. 7(1965): 429-457. Anthony D. King, Colonial urban development: culture, social power, and environment. (London: Routledge & Paul, 1976) 36-37.

12 This trope is common in all British health reports and surveys of Calcutta, most powerfully articulated in the reports of W.J. Simpson. “Cholera in Calcutta in 1894, and anti-choleraic inoculation. [Two reports by W.T. Simpson, Health Officer]”1895.

13 Timothy Mitchell. Colonizing Egypt, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 35. Mitchell argues, that the colonizers tried to re-order Egypt as something object-like, picture-like, and legible, and through it available to political and economic domination. Colonial power required the country to become readable, like a book.


The *bhadraloks* in my study are the moddhobitto *bhadraloks* that Sumit Sarkar has described as the middle-income group characterized by English education, professional occupations, and salaried status. They were mostly upper caste, but below the *banias* and above the lower caste and Muslims. Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997) 169. Also, Tithi Bhattacharya has described the economic base of the *bhadraloks*. Tithi Bhattacharya, *The sentinel of culture: class, education, and the colonial intellectual in Bengal (1848-85)* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).


18 Anil Seal, *The emergence of Indian nationalism: competition and collaboration in the later nineteenth century.* (London: Cambridge U.P 1968) 34,


22 *Adda* as it evolved was confined to male Bengalis, but can be considered integral to the Bengali identity. See, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 181.


24 The period before the Battle of Palashi has remained for the most part insulated from questions about the ideologies and operations of territorial governance. Historians have largely focused on the obvious manifestations of Britain’s expansion in India, which for many begins around 1757. Holden Furber, K. N. Chaudhuri, M. N Pearson, and Om Prakash have produced detailed and influential studies of the trading operations of the East India Company and its competitors. However, in detailing the intricate commercial networks, which prevailed in the Indian Ocean, their works implied that the period prior to Palashi was one dominated by trade, and one where questions of sovereignty and authority were largely absent, or at best were secondary considerations. The *Company-State* challenges these longstanding characterizations and opens up fascinating new vistas on the pre-Palashi period by shifting the focus from trade to territory, and provides compelling evidence that the ideologies and structures of territorial expansion were already in play before the big breakout after Palashi. See, Holden Furber. *John Company at work, a study of European expansion in India in the late eighteenth century.* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1948) 23, K.N.Chaudhuri, *Trade and civilization in the Indian Ocean: an economic history from the rise of Islam to 1750.* Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 120-122, M.N.Pearson, *Spices in the Indian Ocean world* (Aldershot, Hampshire, Great Britain, 1996) 67, Om Prakash, *European commercial enterprise in pre-colonial India.* (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 50, Philip J. Stern, *The company-state: corporate sovereignty and the early modern foundations of the British Empire in India.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

25 Rajat Kanta Ray has written an excellent article on the contest between the Nawab of Bengal and English to name Calcutta. When the Nawab captured the region in 1756, he immediately named it Alinagar. In 1757, when the EIC acquired it back, they named it Calcutta. As Ray suggests, this constant struggle over the name reflected the Mughal-English contest over the country itself. See, Rajat Kanta Ray, “Calcutta or Alinagar: Contending Conceptions in the

26 Thomas Metcalf has put forward a very different idea. He argues that the British used architectural styles to legitimize colonial rule and establish themselves as the natural successors to the Mughals after 1857. See, Thomas R. Metcalf, An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 43.

27 Pradip Sinha first put forward the idea of comprador rajas in contributing to the urban growth of Calcutta. In Marxist use, this means a class of natives who collaborate with foreign powers, mostly in economic ventures. Sinha meant a class of wealthy Indian merchants who worked as agents of the EIC. See, Pradip Sinha, Calcutta in urban history. (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1978), 16.

28 Banias were wealthy Bengali merchants who also acted as agents for the Company. This meant that they were fronts in the Company trade, extending capital and providing local knowledge.

29 The idea of the comprador rajas, and their role in building the city was taken up by Nisith Ranjan Ray, Nisith Ranjan Ray, Calcutta: the profile of a city. (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1986) and S. N. Mukherjee, Calcutta: essays in urban history, (Calcutta: Subarnarekha. 1991). Mukherjee writes that from the 1830s, the decline of the comprador classes changed the urban scenario. Around 1840s, the collaboration of the indigenous merchants was waning. The merchants and traders had been loyal to the British in their work, but their remunerations were far below their expectations. This made them turn against the British. The colonial bureaucrats retaliated by producing insalubrious pictures of Calcutta through Fever Committee reports, sanitary committee reports and health maps. Calcutta was reduced to an inhospitable place with dangerous diseases and dirt.

30 C.A.Bayly has explored in fine details a rich class of Indian merchants, landholders, and moneylenders who mediated between the state and agrarian society in the eighteenth century. The Mughal apparatus created them. Through collaboration with the British they later provided an appropriate infrastructure for Company trade, and colonialism. C.A.Bayly, Rulers, townsmen, and bazaars: north Indian society in the age of British expansion, 1770-1870. (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Cambridge University Press. 1983).

31 Nisith Ranjan Ray, Calcutta: Profile of a city, 56

32 Sharada Dwivedi and Rahul Mehrotra’s work on Bombay presents the most comprehensive architectural survey, while Mariam Dossal’s study of the city offers a detailed planning history of the city. See, Sharada Dwivedi, Rahul Mehrotra, and Uamima Mulla-Feroze. Bombay: the cities within. (Bombay: India Book House, 1995) and Mariam Dossal, Theatre of conflict, city of hope: Mumbai, 1660 to present times. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010)


34 Stephen Legg, Spaces of colonialism: Delhi's urban governmentalties, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2007)


37 Chattopadhyay, Representing Calcutta, 49.

38 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Of Garbage, Modernity and the Citizen's Gaze” Economic and Political Weekly 27:10/11, (Mar. 7-14, 1992), 541-547. Chakrabarty shows the although the bazaar is the place where strangers meet and economic transactions take place, the traders and shopkeepers forge kinship relations and address customers as ‘dada’ or ‘bhai’ (brother). In India, the public is the extension of the private: the family and the community.


English utilitarianism offered the state with an opportunity to regulate and control landed property, law, and overall administration. The British notion of strong centralized government with almost despotic powers, robbed the relations between the ruler and the ruled of its human warmth, whereas humans constituted the centre point of the entire libertarian ideology. For a detailed account of English utilitarianism in India, See Eric Stokes, The English Utilitarians and India. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959). Also, see Uday Singh Mehta, Liberalism and empire: a study in nineteenth-century British liberal thought (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Mehta’s main argument is that liberalism and empire do not contradict each other but are related.

See Arturo Escobar, Encountering development: the making and unmaking of the Third World (Princeton, N.J Princeton University Press, 1995) 105. Escobar describes how the dominant development discourse based on modernization and the Western idea of progress, creates a Third World of disadvantaged and needy population. To “help” the Third World to become “modern” and “progressive”, the development discourse prescribes the help of the First World: countries who model modernity and progress and have the power and knowledge to ‘help’ the Third World, end up furthering inequalities.


David Arnold, Colonizing the body State medicine and epidemic disease in nineteenth-century India. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 38.

Charles E. Trevelyan, Statement by Sir Charles Trevelyan of the circumstances connected with his recall from the government of Madras. (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1860) English education led to a debate between the state and the missionaries. The missionaries wanted to impart western education to the Indians through the religious morals and values of Christianity, as was the case in England where the Church exerted influence on educational
institutions. However, the colonial authority feared violent reactions from the Indians, especially the educated, if religious education was imposed on them. The state preferred a more secular education for the moral uplift of the Indians.


55 Viswanathan, *Masks of conquest,* 48. While the Orientalists wanted to impart education in the European knowledge system through native languages along with indigenous forms of knowledge, the Anglicists favored imparting European knowledge in the English medium. The Anglicists finally won this debate, and consequently institutionalized English education and the English language in 1835.

56 Vishwanathan, 21.

57 Sumit Sarkar, “Kaliyuga, Chakri and Bhakti-Ramakrishna and His Times” *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. XXVII (1992) 1543-1559. Here chakri means the workplace, but also implies the rigors and harsh disciplines associated with it.


64 By landscape, I am implying the imbrications of urban space and culture


68 Ranajit Guha. "A colonial city and its time(s)". *The Indian Economic and Social History Review,* 2008, 45 (3), 329-351.


75 Ashwini Tambe, *Codes of misconduct regulating prostitution in late colonial Bombay.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) 100.


Ibid


Chapter I

The Black Town: Representing Space in Nineteenth Century Calcutta

The urban formation now known as Calcutta initially comprised three villages - Gobindpur, Sutanuti, and Kalikata - along the river Hooghly. The early settlers of the region were the agrarian and fishing communities, who cleared the forested lands and built huts.1 Their boats traveled up the tidal creeks and the many distributaries of the river up to its estuary. The lively port of Satgaon stood there, embedding the region in the networks of global trade.

In 1690, the English East India Company (EIC) reached Bengal and took part in a lively trade in cotton at Sutanuti. Settling near the cotton market, the merchants carried out extensive surveys of the region. Their surveys described the villages as riddled with epidemics that annihilated half its population every year. They traced these epidemics to the marshy environs and unsanitary neighborhood conditions. They made various small efforts - clearing forests, sanitizing streets, and disinfecting water tanks – to improve the health of the region.

With the British initiatives to improve the villages, the riverbank emerged as a symbolic space displaying imperial power. Between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the riverbank enfolded the processes that transformed the EIC from a joint stock Company to a state like formation. It is in this backdrop, that this chapter examines the emergence of Calcutta as a colonial city. I argue that the spaces of colonial Calcutta2 transformed to represent the rhythms and oscillations of the British rule in India.

I will argue that town improvements stood at the heart of colonial efforts to colonize space, and through it, rule over the people. In the early nineteenth century, the Company employed town improvements to thread together the waterside
villages into the compact of a colonial metropolis: Calcutta. This metropolis grew as the apparatus of colonial dominance, its spaces rationalizing the British presence in the region. In such efforts, the colonial city embodied the multitude of concerns that drove the colonial rule in India.

Starting in the late eighteenth century, the transition of the riverside villages into the colonial city Calcutta took place in three stages. A different colonial purpose informed each stage, molding the contours of the colonial city. In the first stage, the EIC initiated town improvements to reengineer the riverbank to facilitate its trade. At this time, goals of commerce and territorial expansion guided its vision of the colonial city. The Company commissioned new streets and canals to improve internal navigation and also clear the approaches to the port. By this time, it had also acquired zamindari (tax collection) rights of the three villages from prince Azim-Ul-Shan, grandson of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. A network of new streets eased the collection of taxes.

The second stage dovetailed the entrenchment of liberal ideals in Britain, and the flowering of its utilitarian strand in India. As Thomas Metcalf has shown, India was the laboratory for liberal reforms. The British codified law, introduced a new bureaucracy, and experimented in state sponsored education, first in India, and then in Britain. Utilitarianism, a version of liberalism, cleared the road for these reforms. First articulated in the works of British jurist Jeremy Bentham, utilitarian principles explained that the most moral acts were those that maximized pleasure and minimized pain. Later, the works of James Mill carried out the phenomenal task of planting these ideas outside Britain; his followers in India described themselves as agents of utilitarian liberal reform. They pledged to maximize the pleasure and happiness of the Indians through legal reforms and education. Upholding utilitarian
ideals they also engaged in ordering space to maximize happiness of the subject population.

The third stage took shape in the aftermath of the Sepoy mutiny of 1857, and the transfer of power from the Company to the British Crown. Fear of further rebellions characterized this period. Liberalism endorsed a more conservative language as the state tried to make the city revolution free. Unlike the EIC that focused on building streets and canals, town improvements now became the tool to eliminate threats to the political stability of the state. It engaged in widening streets and installing gaslights to facilitate surveillance after dark. It also authorized improvements that required colonial officers to enter Indian houses and inspect the interiors.

Given these diverse ambitions of the British, colonial Calcutta grew as a patchwork of spaces embodying a variety of purposes. In the aftermath of the Sepoy mutiny, colonial town improvements had become aggressive. Invading and restructuring Bengali neighborhoods, these improvements were not in tune with the cultural geography of the city. For instance, in 1860, the state appointed a committee to install a network of subterranean conduits for filtered water. The committee modeled the subterranean network after similar structures in London. The conduits formed a mesh below the Indian houses. For that reason, Hindu Bengalis refused to drink filtered water; they argued that water passing through pipes placed under the houses of the lower castes and non-Hindus, was polluted.

Faced with resistance, the commissioners called for grafting improvements onto the very different cultural landscape of Calcutta. Grafting involved a brute force that overlooked differences, and simply set out to homogenize space. At the
heart of grafting were new building regulations and demolitions of Indian houses. Forcing improvements on the city, grafting tried to regulate its organic growth.

As I will argue, grafting entailed the discursive production of a black town in the colonial health reports. As Anthony D. King has argued, a colonial city is characterized by the zoning of physical space into black and white towns. King explained that the black/white town divided city space into its ethnic, social, and cultural component groups. While the industrial colonizing society occupied and modified the spaces of the white town, the indigenous craft based society lived in the black town. Analyzing the colonial city through the lens of culture, he therefore pointed to different value systems, unique to cultures that structured city space.

This chapter will show that more than geographic space, the “black town” was a product of a symbolic geography that represented native space as a culture of pathology and called for its radical restructuration. I will argue that the black town made possible a distinct representation of Indian space that facilitated an authoritarian colonial rule in the years after the mutiny.

Between 1858 and 1900, the state outfitted Calcutta with wide streets, sewers, electricity, and filtered water. Although the new infrastructure intended to repair insanitary neighborhoods, it brought about unexpected dilemmas. Setting up new technical networks through an already dense urban fabric required showing the Bengalis the frailty of the existing structures. To this end, a “black town” in the colonial health surveys drew attention to the chaos and disorder that plagued Indian neighborhoods.

Health surveys, I will explain, did not simply portray the chaos, but was instrumental in producing it. Textual and visual evidence selectively represented filth to transform Bengali neighborhoods into the black town. Selective
representation meant that the health officers seized on occasional instances of filth to argue that it was usual. They described the filthiest of Bengali houses as representative of all Indian houses; they explained streets and privies in Bengali neighborhoods overflowing with excreta at all times.

The health reports revealed that the Bengalis assigned low priority to spatial hygiene. These provide vivid details of the frustrations that overcame the health officers as they groped their way through the filth. When their efforts to sanitize these streets and houses met with resistance, they called for increased powers to regulate and civilize the “black town”. The black town was then different from the native town; while the native town was the space inhabited by the Bengalis, the black town was a discursive product that represented the geography of unhygiene.

This chapter will also argue that the matrix of new roads and public works nourished new forms of interaction between the Bengalis and the state. This interaction focused on functions of town improvements: who should pay for them, and whom they should serve. These interactions took place most visibly in the writings of a group of Bengali men who called themselves “ratepayers” or men who paid taxes for town improvements. Exploring these writings, I will show that at first they supported the colonial efforts to improve the city. With the grafting of town improvements, and the eventual shaping of a black town, they, however, started to question the motives of the state in initiating improvements.

By the late nineteenth century, the ratepayers decided to “rescue” town improvements from the state. Rescuing meant that while they agreed that town improvements were necessary, they also believed that only a proper authority could enforce these. To this end, they started carrying out town improvements on their own. To challenge authoritarian town improvements, they reinvented Hindu
principles of spatial hygiene. Their critique of colonial town improvements imagined Calcutta as a Hindu city, a process that carried well into the twentieth century.

I. The Company-State and the Colonial City

When the English East India Company (EIC) first arrived in Bengal, the merchants settled in a region directly below the cotton market at Sutanuti. An active trade in cotton between the Portuguese and the Bengali merchants had earlier shaped this market. In the sixteenth century, Portuguese merchants had reached Satgaon and called it porto pequeno (little haven). They engaged in a prosperous trade with the Bengalis, and a market sprang up to the west of the river Hooghly.

This trade, however, did not continue for long. Heavy silting at the mouth of the river led to its rapid decline. The Indian merchants then moved downstream, but their haat or market in cotton bales, remained further north.

As the British began to settle in Sutanuti, they found the area too wild, the rivers unclean, and the tidal flats too tempting not to fill in. They carried out surveys that described the dense forests, enormous salt-water lakes, and the moist air deteriorating the health of the region. Calcutta featured in these surveys as a pestilential village: a swamp infested with wild animals. Further, the merchants argued that the population, mostly fishermen and agricultural communities, were “rude people” who lived in clusters of mud huts.

Although the British described the villages as pestilential, they selected the banks of the Hooghly to build their base in Bengal. In 1690, the agent of the EIC in Bengal, Job Charnock, set up his residence in Sutanuti. As Walter Hamilton, editor of the East India Gazetteer, explained, Charnock was quick to realize the strategic
location of the riverside villages.\textsuperscript{11} Settling there, he tried to restructure the region in ways that could benefit the Company trade in unprecedented ways.

![Map of Calcutta, 1690-1757](image)

\textsuperscript{11} Figure 1: Map of Calcutta, 1690-1757, Map by Charles Hampton, Calcutta, City of Palaces (Source: Jeremiah P. Losty. Calcutta: city of palaces: a survey of the city in the days of the East India Company, 1690-1858. London: British Library, 1990.), 32.

As the map shows, all three villages were conveniently located along Hooghly for overseas trade. Additionally, the Chitpore Creek connected the river to the swamps facilitating internal navigation. The route of pilgrimage connected the shrine of goddess Kali to the Chitpore Creek. Charnock realized that while the Hooghly could transport the exports, canals and creeks could circulate goods within the three villages.\textsuperscript{12}

Calcutta was in fact far from a marshy swamp when the British arrived and started living there. Already, Setts and Basaks, who were Bengali merchants, had carried out two hundred years of lively trade with the Portuguese. With the returns of this trade, they had cleared the forested lands, built mansions, temples, and markets (\textit{haats}). The shrine of Kali at Kalighat was also a popular destination for pilgrims. The shrine attracted hundreds of thousands of pilgrims. Many of them built new huts near the shrine and settled there. In sum, impressive temples, mud huts, brick houses, and \textit{haats}, populated Calcutta when Charnock reached Sutanuti.
Crafting the Colonial City, Annexations and Expansion

With the EIC merchants living in Sutanuti, what followed in the next few years was a colonial reordering of the riverbank. The British built a port, a factory, and a fort to transform Calcutta into a coastal center of commerce. As a commercial thoroughfare, Calcutta also emerged as the center of political, social, religious, and intellectual life in the colony.

In 1690, the Company established a factory along the river Hooghly. To ensure the safety of the factory, the Court of Directors instructed the agents to annex the nearby farms and villages. Their efforts to annex villages, however, met with resistance. In 1695, the zamindar (tax collector) of Burdwan, Sobha Singh, revolted against the Company.

The Company now took two major steps to protect its settlements along the Hooghly. First, it purchased zamindari rights of all three villages from prince Azim-Us-Shan, grandson of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. With the new zamindari rights, the EIC could now collect taxes, and also discharge judicial and military duties. It did not, however, enjoy proprietary rights and had to pay an annual rent to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb.

Second, in 1699, the Company built a fort along water tank, the Lal Dighi. Named after William III, King of England, the fort formed a defensive arm around the factory. This fort became the nucleus of the colonial city. Spatial patterns surrounding this fort, marked the earliest racial zoning of the region: while the Company’s merchants built their houses on the southern expanses of the fort, the Bengalis, lived away from these settlements.

“Calcutta” at this time meant the region surrounding the Lal Dighi. It was the largest dihi or subdivision in the zamindari of the Company. As zamindars of all
three villages, the Company was in control of plots of land between the river Hooghly and the Salt lakes, that is, from Gobindpur to Sutanuti. The Company split the territory under its control into four dihis or divisions.\textsuperscript{15} Calcutta was the largest dihi that housed the fort, the British offices, and the houses of the Company’s merchants.

As zamindars, the Company tried to improve the sanitary conditions of dihi Calcutta. In 1727, under a Royal charter it established a corporation consisting of a mayor and nine aldermen.\textsuperscript{16} This corporation was the earliest colonial committee entrusted with the work of town improvements. Besides deliberating law cases, the mayor also commissioned small improvements, like sanitizing streets and water tanks near the Lal Dighi.

In 1717, the Mughal emperor Farukshiyar granted the EIC a firman, or a royal dictat, exempting the payment of custom duties in Bengal. In the years that followed, the merchants converted the Lal Dighi area into docks with a canal running towards the eastern levee that bordered the Hooghly. All through the eighteenth century the docks expanded, transforming Calcutta from a riverside village to a bustling center of water borne commerce.

As early as the mid-eighteenth century, residential zones in Calcutta were divided between its Europeans and the Bengali residents. These divisions sharpened with the impending attack of the Marathas. Janoji, son of Raghujir Bhonsle, the head of the Maratha force was at the time carrying out raids all over the country. Fearing a possible attack, the residents of the western side of Hooghly crossed over and sought British protection. Nawab Alivardi Khan granted them permission to build an entrenchment to keep away the Marathas.\textsuperscript{17} Keeping away the Marathas, the Maratha ditch also formed the boundary of the English settlement. Within the limits
of the Maratha ditch, the English reigned supreme; on the other side, Mughal systems were still in practice.

In 1757, the British victory at Palashi marked a decisive moment in the growth of the colonial city. In 1756, Siraj-Ud-Daullah, the Nawab of Bengal attacked the Fort William, captured all three villages, and renamed the region Alinagar. The next year, the Company defeated his forces at the Battle of Palashi (1757) and retrieved the territories.

This victory marked a new phase in the history of the colonial city. First, the Company came to control more territory than before; after Palashi, it possessed all lands on both sides of the Maratha ditch. It also annexed considerable tract of land from the Twenty-Four Parganas (districts) that adjoined Calcutta. When the Company began reconstruction after the recapture of territories, it pushed the limits of Calcutta to include the Simla, Mallanga, and Mirzapore, which were earlier privately owned districts.

Second, Palashi revealed the weaknesses of the existing fort. The encounters showed that the fort did not occupy a strategic position from a defense point of view. The walls of the fort were too weak to survive combats. This mandated the building of a new fort. The Company now commissioned a fort a mile down the river Hooghly in Gobindpur. Lady Kindersely who lived near the old fort described, “the new fort was so big that it was a city by itself”. The new fort had houses for the Company officials, barracks for the troops, schools, and also a prison.

Standing along the river Hooghly, the new fort reconfigured the village of Gobindpur. Prior to the building of the fort, Gobindpur was a densely inhabited village of the Bengalis. For over two hundred years, the families of the cotton merchants Setts and Basaks had lived there. They had established a temple of the
Hindu deity Govindji, popular among the Hindus. Upper-caste, wealthy Hindus lived near this temple. The building of the new fort forced them to leave their houses and move to Kalighat and Sutanuti. The Nawab paid them restitution money, and the residents of the village had to move where they received plots of land.

Incidentally, the Company did not rebuild or expand the fort where it stood earlier. This was because rebuilding it there required the demolition of European houses. As Mr. Barker, an EIC merchant argued, the new spot did not have this problem as huts of the “black people” that populated its spaces “were of no consequence”.

The new fort zoned the three villages into two racial halves. The British built their houses on the land south of the fort. Here the gardens, offices, markets, churches, and buildings displayed Victorian architecture. To the north of the fort was the Indian part of the city. Here the houses, temples, and bazaars followed very different spatial patterns. Most of the houses here were low-level mud huts, designed to keep away the scorching summer sun.

In the early nineteenth century, this spatial order transformed when imperial political discourses articulated liberal reforms for India. By this time, a liberal ideology had become dominant in Britain. Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism and Adam Smith’s notion of free markets played a critical role in remaking Britain. By the 1820s, free traders and Utilitarians employed ideals of liberalism to create a new ideology of imperial governance in India. Going beyond simple annexation and expansion, utilitarian ideals now informed colonial visions of the city.

**British Utilitarianism and Colonial Calcutta**

Far from liberty and equality, key tenets of British liberalism, James Mill described civilization progressing in stages. His *History of British India* (1817)
made a strong case for utilitarian reform, explaining that the Hindus of India were always inferior to the Europeans, even when “dark feudal ages” plagued Europe. To cure a civilization of its heathen practices and to help them resist years of despotic rule, he called for reforms similar to those implemented in Britain. These reforms, were the “right actions” that provided greatest benefit for the greatest numbers.

Informed by the Utilitarian ideals, the EIC commissioned a network of new streets in Calcutta. The Company officials argued that broad, straight streets could offer the Indians the route to progress. According to them, the existing landscape was “wild”, and the streets “tortuous”. Enveloped in dense forests, the merchants frequently sighted wild animals on the streets. They explained that this landscape was fit only for savage and backward people. New, broad streets could provide fresh passages and mark the onset of civilization.23 Upholding Utilitarianism, the Company suggested that a network of systematic streets could also ensure the health, happiness, and safety of the Bengalis.

Streets, in fact, had remained at the center of colonial town improvements from the late eighteenth century. In 1794, the EIC invested the Justices of Peace with the work of improving the entire region between Gobindpur and Sutanuti. The Justices appointed scavengers to clean the existing streets.24 One of their greatest achievements was metalling the Circular Road.

Utilitarian ideals in the early nineteenth century intensified these street-building projects of the EIC. The implications of the new streets, however, went beyond sanitation and hygiene. Instead, the streets provided a framework in which the British cast the values and identities of the Indians in a new light. At the very outset, the new streets contrasted the existing streets as backward, drawing attention to the failure of the Indians to build modern, hygienic spaces. This, in turn,
mandated a different brand of liberalism: the civilizing mission. Building new streets, the British pledged to set the Indians on a journey to civilization.

For instance, in 1803, Governor General Wellesley’s minute provided an account of the disorderly growth of streets in Bengali neighborhoods. He condemned the Bengalis for opening new streets without paying enough attention to the health or safety of the city.\textsuperscript{25} Houses, markets, slaughterhouses and burial grounds therefore encroached on the streets in perilous ways. He advised that a network of broad, straight, and clean streets should replace the awkward web of Indian streets.

In these deeply racial arguments, the British appeared as the more advanced race, cleaning streets \textit{for} the Bengalis and introducing them to the basic skills of sanitation. Providing evidence that the Bengalis had failed to build their cities in hygienic ways, the new streets displayed hygiene and sanitation as virtues that the utilitarian British would teach them.

Following Wellesley’s minute, Governor General Minto in January 1809, constituted a new committee to build a network of new streets in Calcutta. Lotteries funded the work of this committee. Lotteries, as means of raising funds for public and charitable purposes, were common in England in the eighteenth century. In the early nineteenth century, the EIC introduced lotteries to finance improvements in India.\textsuperscript{26} By this time, the Company resembled a modern state. It had powers to collect taxes, declare war, mint money, and administer law. That the Company still used lottery receipts to fund its work showed that regardless of its administrative roles, it continued to view the colony only as a source of income, with very little to invest.
Nevertheless, the Lottery Committee of 1809 played a key role in defining what would eventually grow as metropolitan Calcutta. At the lotteries that funded its work expensive paintings, books, and pieces of pottery imported from Europe were auctioned, alongside plots of land. With these receipts, the committee filled up the Maratha Ditch from Chitpore to the Beliaghata canal. While filling this ditch, it also filled up a portion of the Beliaghata Canal from Hastings Street to Entally. It constructed a road, parallel to the ditch that circled it and marked the limits of municipal Calcutta.

The Lottery Committee introduced a network of impeccably straight north-south streets. These streets were more geometric than the organic layout of the region. The new streets provided direct routes than the previous winding roads, speeding up traffic and the deployment of troops through the city. They opened the inaccessible alleyways into broad, straight streets, easily accessible for the public, making the city more uniform.

Figure 2: Map showing Calcutta in 1862, The Church missionary Atlas, 1896 (Source: Church Missionary Society, Church missionary atlas containing an account of the various countries in which the Church Missionary Society labors: and of its missionary operations. London: Church Missionary Society, 1896)
Utilitarian ideals couched the economic purposes that these streets served. The Lottery Committee argued that the new streets, with their broad stretches and uniform surfaces would offer better ventilation and improve the health of the city dwellers. Clearing the street sides of forests, it also explained that the streets would bring in sunlight and cure the dampness of the air. Designing and constructing a road network with a high degree of connectivity, however, was an efficient colonial strategy to speed up the port bound traffic. Bringing together distant parts of the villages, the new streets also expanded the boundaries of metropolitan Calcutta within which the Company levied town duties.

In 1817, pleased with the work of the Lottery Committee, the EIC expanded it. But at the same time, it added a new clause to the working of the committee. This clause mandated that the commissioners could now use Lottery funds only to excavate new tanks, open new streets, construct new aqueducts, new bridges, and new ghats. This meant that the committee could no longer use the funds to repair existing streets, roads, and sewers. As a result, the Lottery Committee now engaged in opening new streets reaching out to the previously inaccessible parts of the city.

The new streets provided the infrastructural backbone that supported colonial claims of scientific and racial supremacy. The committee built broad and gas lit streets and named these after British bureaucrats –Wellesley, Cornwallis, Kyd, and Elliot. It built some of these streets, such as the Strand Road, with expensive Sumatra sand. It devised new ways to wash the streets every morning, displaying its commitments to hygiene. New commercial enterprises, warehouses, and banks crowded the street sides. Magnificent public squares, also named after the British bureaucrats, stood along these streets, monumentalizing colonial power. Living
within the spectacle, the British expected the Bengalis to comply with their directives.

Meanwhile, as the Lottery Committee focused only on new streets, the condition of the existing streets deteriorated. In 1821, *The Calcutta Journal*, an English periodical, routinely published letters from its readers who voiced grievances against the work of the Lottery Committee. For instance, a reader who called himself Mr. Fairplay described that the Committee’s work left deep hollows in the streets of his neighborhood, resulting in frequent accidents of horse carriages. Another reader, who called herself “an inhabitant”, wrote that the Committee’s work had widened the sewers along Moorghyhatta Road in north Calcutta, making the streets dangerous for carriages.

Going beyond the utilitarian ideals of improving the conditions of the city, the Lottery Committee’s work shaped a new market in land. New streets authorized the committee to bring land with little value under its control. Improving these plots of land, it sold these for higher values. The committee also acquired land adjoining the streets that it built, and sold these at inflated rates. Roopnarain Ghoshal, the treasurer of the Lottery Committee, confirmed the land speculations in his testimony to the Fever Hospital Committee. He explained that in Strand Road and Clive Street the Committee had purchased land for eight hundred to sixteen hundred rupees per *cottah* (roughly seven fifty square feet). After filling a nearby channel of the river Hooghly, the Committee sold the land for sixteen hundred rupees per *cottah*.

In a similar way, the cheapest land that the committee had bought was between Loudon Street and Short’s Bazaar. Here it paid fifty rupees for each *cottah* of land. After improving the streets in that area, the committee sold the land for two
hundred rupees per cottah. Similarly, in Chitpore, the Committee purchased land at six hundred rupees per cottah. Widening the road, it sold the land for eight hundred to one thousand rupees per cottah.

As land speculations promised fertile returns, the Lottery Committee engaged in forceful acquisitions of private property. In 1818, Madubram and Ramchunder Mullick complained that the Committee had grabbed twenty-two cottahs of their land in Machchua Bazaar. This land was the Mullick’s patrimonial inheritance, which they rented out for rupees forty every month.

The Lottery Committee enjoyed powers to resolve land disputes on its own. This made its land acquisitions even more authoritarian. Most of the lawsuits that it resolved lingered on for days. The Committee maintained a lackadaisical attitude in resolving them. For instance, the Mullicks petitioned the Committee three times, but did not hear from them. When they petitioned for a fourth time, the secretary of the Lottery Committee, Mr. Trotter inquired into the case. Within a few days, he declared that the Committee had not acquired any land near the Mullick residence. He agreed, however, that earlier in 1811, the improvement commissioners had taken over two or three cottahs of the Mullicks land to install a sewer. Instead of paying the Mullicks for the twenty-two cottahs that they demanded, the committee compensated them for the three cottahs.

Indeed, most of the lawsuits that the Lottery Committee deliberated were long drawn out. In 1826, when Gopee Mohun Deb filed a case against the Lottery Committee for destroying ghats (riverbanks) to widen public streets, the proceedings went on for sixteen years. After sixteen years, Justices Ryan, Seton, and Grant, dismissed the unresolved case.
By 1836, the Lottery Committee, however, had exhausted its funds. The commissioners issued a public statement declaring “the lottery funds may now be declared to be extinct for all purposes of improvement in Calcutta”.35

What the committee had established in these twenty years was that it had successfully marked the boundaries of metropolitan Calcutta. The network of new streets had threaded together a territory that now grew as municipal Calcutta. The Regulation Act of 1830 concretized these limits by declaring that town duties would be levied within the “town of Calcutta” that extended from “its junction with the river Hooghly at Baug bazaar, to Ballyaghat and Entally canals, from the junction of canals to the Ballygunje custom chokey and from there to Tollygunje”.36

The years after the Lottery Committee disbanded were a period of unrest. 1857 witnessed an armed mutiny of Indian soldiers serving under the British flag. In the rebellion’s aftermath, the British government took direct control of the administration of India, establishing the India Office and a secretary of state for India in London, and appointing a Viceroy and provincial governors to govern in India itself. With this shift in power, British attitude towards the Bengalis hardened. To eliminate threats to their political stability, the British engaged in strict surveillance of Bengali houses and routinely policed their neighborhoods. At the same time, they employed town improvements to invade, survey, and regulate the Bengali parts of the city.

II. Grafting Improvements, and the Limits of Utilitarianism

In 1869, James Watt & Co. used the designs of William Clark to construct a magnificent water work at Pultah, near Calcutta. With the paraphernalia imported from London, the waterworks were a scientific and visual wonder. Two enormous iron pipes supplied the water, and machines pumped it into six huge settling tanks
where, thanks to Clark’s design, the sediment was filtered. Adding to these new techniques were the subterranean conduits: scientific marvels that ran beneath the streets and houses supplying the city with filtered water.

As the water work progressed, sanitary commissioner John Strachey warned that town improvements were useless till the time the city had a modern system of sewers. He showed that the existing sewer system was “open”, or uncovered, and dumped enormous amounts of filth on the street sides. This filth polluted the air, making all other improvements pointless. Following Strachey’s warning, the improvement commissioners made provisions for a scientific system of sewers. Once again, it was William Clark who designed a subterranean network of sewers. These sewers ran beneath the streets, bordering the conduits for filtered water, and drained the sewage into the nearby saltwater lakes.

Although unparalleled in technical precision, the subterranean network failed to attract the Bengalis. They resisted both the underground sewers and the filtered water supply. Running underneath the houses, pipes drained sewage below bedrooms and kitchens. The Bengali custom, however, was to stop sewage from coming in contact with these parts of the house. They considered such contact as polluting for their caste practices. That was why the Bengalis built their privies away from the residential quarters. A passage, or the courtyard, separated the privy from the residential parts of the house. According to Clark’s plan, the underground conduits ran directly below the residential quarters. For that reason, the Bengalis refused to connect their houses to the network of underground channels.

For the same reason, the Bengalis did not drink filtered water as this passed through subterranean conduits. The conduits for filtered water ran below houses that belonged to men and women of different castes and religions. Upper caste Hindu
Bengalis refused to drink this water as the pipes brought it in contact with the lower caste and Muslim houses. Further, the new system required them to collect water from shared stand posts. The commissioners did not install enough stand posts, which meant that the Bengalis had to share the water. Sharing stand posts with the lower castes was unimaginable for upper caste Bengalis. They considered the stand posts a threat to their caste purity. Although the commissioners tried to convince them to drink filtered water, they continued to draw their water from the water tanks.

When a few upper caste Bengalis agreed to drink filtered water, the stand posts failed to meet their requirements. Particularly in summer, when the demand for water was high, water dribbled from the stand posts. Even with engines at full pressure, the stand posts could not supply more than two million gallons of water in a day. This was less than half of the amount required by the people. In many neighborhoods, the posts failed to supply even this quantity. For hours, upper caste Bengalis queued up with the lower castes, but failed to fill their vessels. This added to their grievances, and their eventual rejection of the stand posts.40

To make matters worse, the subterranean networks were incompatible to the structural designs of the Bengali houses. The Bengalis built their huts low to keep away the scorching sun and sweltering heat. For the same reason, they did not leave much space between their huts. Given the hot summers, they preferred living in darker houses. While many Bengalis lived in brick built structures, a considerable section lived in kutcha huts made of mud. Built of mud, these huts kept the interiors cold. The kutcha huts, however, were low-lying and unsuited for the subterranean network: they failed to create the pressure needed to push water along the pipes.
In a similar way, the system of ventilation in Bengali houses was inapt for the labyrinth of underground sewers and water pipes. Ventilation in Bengali houses meant a customary way of bringing in the southern breeze.\textsuperscript{41} A central courtyard, the \textit{uthhon}, open to sunlight and fresh air ventilated the houses.\textsuperscript{42} There was, however, no single prototype of a courtyard. Big houses usually had two courtyards: the inner and outer. The space of the courtyard varied in different parts of the city according to the availability of land. Courtyards in the southern parts of the city were usually bigger than the north.\textsuperscript{43} The Marwaris, a wealthy entrepreneurial group in Calcutta, on the other hand had an altogether new way of building courtyards. Their houses followed the \textit{chawk} system, where there was only one apartment with a quadrangle at the centre and a range of rooms on the floor above.\textsuperscript{44}

Courtyards proved impervious to the excavation of subterranean conduits. First, courtyards were large expanses of land inside the house. While the commissioners could excavate the streets, they could not do the same in private property. When they ordered the Bengalis to take initiative and excavate the courtyards, they simply refused. They argued that the process was expensive. Further, they explained that religious festivals took place in the courtyards and sewer pipes running beneath it would bring filth in direct contact with the rituals and pollute it.

Sewage in Bengali houses was also very different from that of London. In London, sewers received enormous amounts of trade effluent from chemical and dye factories. In sharp contrast, domestic waste, colloidal substances, and chlorine were present in exceptionally large amounts in the sewage in Calcutta.\textsuperscript{45} The new sewers were ill equipped to drain this refuse. Loaded with these waste, the sewers remained clogged for days.
Finally, Clark declared that the subterranean network had failed in Calcutta. The paraphernalia imported from London did not work in the city. In addition to difference in geography, caste and religion kept the Bengalis divided. The subterranean network contrasted their cultural practices and contributed little to improve their neighborhoods.

Although Clark declared that the subterranean network had failed, the state did not. Instead, it pushed forward with the new sewers. In narrow lanes, it ordered the improvement commissioners to set up the new sewers. This resulted in deteriorating the health of the Bengalis. Cooped up in the narrow spaces, the sewers discharged noxious sewer gases. These gases without first passing through a depurator escaped into the Bengali houses. This dangerously contaminated the air inhaled by the Bengalis and resulted in dangerous sewer gas diseases.46

Even though the subterranean network contrasted the spatial customs of the Bengalis, it empowered the state in new ways. It reinforced the role of technology in providing an illusion of British control and comprehension of the Bengalis. While installing the sewers, the British marched into the most remote parts of the Bengali neighborhoods. Here they surveyed the streets and houses.47 They prepared a detailed inventory of these houses, complete with descriptions of its structures, floors, rooms, and inhabitants.

Prior to the water work, tanks and wells were the repositories of drinking water in Calcutta. To force the Bengalis to drink filtered water, the improvement commissioners had filled up these water tanks.48 When the Bengalis refused to drink the piped water, there were hardly wells or tanks left to meet their requirements. The scarcity of drinking water inconvenienced them, specially with the outbreak of plague in the late nineteenth century.
When plague broke out in the late nineteenth century, the lack of proper sewers, and drinking water, further deteriorated the situation. A Bengali author Bhubanchandra Mukhopadhyay wrote in *Bangarahasya* that an epidemic was destroying the city but the doctors failed to identify it. As they remained unsuccessful in identifying the disease, they called it plague.\textsuperscript{49} He wrote that the doctors used the term plague intermittently for all fevers; they then introduced drastic measures to control it.\textsuperscript{50} To control the spread of plague, the state introduced general inoculation with Mr. Haffkine’s prophylactic. This resulted in an inoculation scare in the city. A crowd terrified of *tickawalahs*, or inoculators, broke out in violence. Crowds of Bengalis fleeing from the state’s plague prevention schemes blocked the streets for days. In May, an angry crowd set an ambulance on fire in broad daylight in College Street.\textsuperscript{51}

Undeterred by this resistance, the state commissioned a Building Commission to control plague in 1897. The Commission described its work as reordering the city in hygienic ways and regulating future epidemics. In reality, the Building Commission was a licensing body that tried to make Bengali houses and neighborhoods amenable to town improvements. To this end, it ordered rebuilding of Bengali houses to open these for improvements.

Within a few years of its establishment, the Building Commission targeted the courtyards, refusing to authorize these in the new plans. The Commission also ordered homeowners to roof up existing courtyards. In 1897, Bama Bewah and Shama Bewah, both residents of Burtola Street in north Calcutta, submitted a plan to the Building Commission for building additional rooms in their houses.\textsuperscript{52} The commissioners replied that instead of building new rooms, they should cover the central courtyard and build rooms there. Arguing that courtyards were nothing more
than “receptacles of filth”, they explained that these had little use in the Bengali house. According to them, roofing up the courtyard would clear the accumulated filth, and improve the health of the Bengalis.

Figure 3: Plan of Bama Bewah’s hut at 83, Burtola Street showing the roofed up courtyard, Building Commission Reports, 1897.

Figure 4: Plan of Shama Bewah’s house in Burtola Street, with courtyards covered up. Building Commission Report, 1897.

Already in 1888, municipal byelaws had stipulated that courtyards should not occupy more than one fourth of the aggregate area of the house.\textsuperscript{53} As the Bewahs case show, often when the city dwellers submitted a plan, the Building Commission ordered them to cover their courtyards.

Adding to this, the Building Commission targeted the \textit{kutcha} huts of the city. It argued that plague was more prevalent in these huts than the brick built structures.\textsuperscript{54} The first cluster of \textit{kutcha} huts that the Building Commission identified
and demolished as “plague spot”, was in Durmahatta Street in north Calcutta. Following the miasma theory of epidemics, the commissioner traced plague to the overcrowded and “foul” huts of the area. The medical officer described the huts as a “bustee” or an insanitary Bengali settlement comprising “a mixture of gunny bag stores, crowded dwelling rooms and foul smelling cowsheds”. Their cure for the insanitation of these huts was complete demolition. They employed a gang of workers to force hut dwellers to evacuate the premises, and carry out demolition.

The next group of kutchas that the Building Commission demolished was in Bonomali Sircar Lane, also in north Calcutta. Here the commissioners traced plague to “dark and damp interiors” of the kutchas. It served notices to the residents to evacuate their huts within a day, as their huts were “plague spots”. When the residents delayed, the commissioners employed the Police to evacuate the premise.

The hut dwellers protracted the demolition of huts by refusing to leave the premises within the stipulated time. While some resisted the loss of their home, others feared losing their caste. In the evacuation camps, the commissioners forced the Brahmins to eat food cooked by the non-Brahmins. This terrified them as they considered living, eating, and sleeping in rooms with the lower castes as mlechhachar (bad practice).

Nevertheless, the Building Commission carried on with their demolitions. In Puggyaputty Lane, they razed fifty kutchas and used the plots of land to construct a fifteen feet wide street. They built brick houses along the street and sold these for higher values. These houses did not improve the neighborhood from a sanitary point of view. Instead, the houses abutted on the street in dangerous ways, had poorly ventilated rooms, and lacked airspace at the back.
The most radical of demolitions that the Building commission carried out was in the western part of Mechuabazar Street. Here, the commission opened an East-West running street and left considerable part of the land open for use in the future.

Figure 5: The Indian neighborhood at Mechuabazar Street before demolition, Report on Municipal Administration of Calcutta, 1910.

Figure 6: The Indian neighborhood at Mechuabazar Street after demolition, Report on Municipal Administration of Calcutta, 1910.

It was in this backdrop of demolitions that a black town took shape in the colonial health reports. Black Town entailed a certain representation of space as primitive and closed to reason. This representation rationalized the colonial restructuration and demolitions of Indian neighborhoods. As I will argue, the translation of Bengali neighborhoods into the black town served a dual purpose. First, the primitiveness of the black town contrasted the European parts of the city and recast its residents as culturally and technologically superior. Second, blackness
revealed the subterranean selves of the Bengalis: irrational, uncivilized, and savage.

This blackness then revoked all claims of cultural specificity.

III. Producing the Black Town

In 1837, James Ranald Martin, a British surgeon, had first described the impact of environment on human health. In 1818, during the Burmese war, he was in charge of the health of the British troops at Fort William. At this time, he witnessed cholera from very close quarters. Twenty years later, in 1837, he wrote a detailed survey of the medical landscape of Calcutta in the *Notes on Medical Topography*. His writings explained diseases endemic in the “undrained, filthy, and stinking neighborhoods of the Bengalis”.

For example, describing the populous Bengali neighborhood of Bhowanipur, he wrote:

> Peculiarly exposed through its low, closely packed houses, ill ventilated street, great stagnant ditches, lined with rank vegetation, its background on extensive marsh and underwoods and its innumerable half dried tanks.

Martin was a supporter of the miasma theory of epidemics. He believed that refuse and noxious odors of decayed matter produced epidemics. For that reason, he warned that the Bengali neighborhoods housed miasmas or noxious gases and bred the worst of diseases. He therefore suggested restructuring these neighborhoods in ways similar to the European neighborhoods.

By the late nineteenth century, colonial health officers reported several instances of epidemics resulting in deaths in the Bengali neighborhoods. Following Martin, they argued that these epidemics took shape in the filth and the dampness of the Bengali houses. Scientists in London had by this time proved the germ theory, or the existence of pathogenic organisms for epidemics like cholera. The observations and epidemiological studies of John Snow (1813-58) in London and William Budd
(1811-80) in Bristol, England, for instance, supported this theory. Their findings, however, failed to convince the advocates of miasma theory in Calcutta. More than personal health and infection, they traced cholera and plague to the filth of the streets, water tanks, and the unwholesome living conditions of the Bengalis.

To prove the miasma theory, health officers engaged in a selective representation of the Bengali neighborhoods. Selective representation meant that they seized on unusual instances of filth to argue that it was common. To this end, they pointed to the filthiest of Bengali houses as examples of typical Bengali houses. They described filth-covered streets and polluted water tanks as usual in the neighborhoods.

At the heart of the discursive production of the black town was the colonial argument that epidemics always took shape in the Bengali neighborhoods. When epidemics broke out in the European districts, the health officers traced these back to the filth of the Bengali neighborhoods. For instance, in December 1871, a British bureaucrat Mr. Tracey succumbed to cholera in a boarding house in the European part of the city. He, along with his wife, and their Indian servant, were at the time visiting the city from London. They lived in a boarding house in Russel Street, at the heart of the English town. Three days after they reached Calcutta, Mr. Tracey was convalescent. When his health deteriorated further, the doctors declared that he was suffering from cholera.

In the following week, cholera spread like wildfire in the boarding house. Mrs. Wimberley and Archdaeon Pratt, who lived in the floors below Mr. Tracey, also suffered severe bouts of dyspepsia.

Russel Street was geographically distant from Bengali neighborhoods. The outbreak of cholera in this region questioned the colonial argument that epidemics
always had roots in Bengali houses. The colonial state now commissioned an 
enquiry committee to investigate the outbreak. This committee, finding it difficult to 
establish any credible points of contact, argued that violent winds had transported 
filth from the Bengali neighborhoods to Russel Street. The filth then decomposed 
and produced disease in the boarding house.

A second incident took place in 1885, when cholera broke out in the Alipore 
prison of Calcutta. Gobindo Chunder Bose was the first casualty. In late March, 
Gobindo suffered choleric diarrhea. Instead of treating him for cholera, the guards 
moved him to the general hospital adjoining the prison. The next day Atterally, 
another prisoner, exhibited similar symptoms and the guards moved him to the same 
hospital. Atterally died the next afternoon. In the following week, Madhab Lohar, 
Shitto Adhir, Adbul Aziz, Bhundoo Kahar, Shitto khan and Khedree Dome, all 
reached the hospital with dyspeptic fits of cholera. Many of them died within days, 
while the others suffered diarrheic spells.

The state ordered the prison authorities to prepare a report on the deaths. The 
report shows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Patients</th>
<th>Date of attack</th>
<th>Date of death</th>
<th>State of health</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gobindo Chunder Bose</td>
<td>March 18\textsuperscript{th} at 11 A.M.</td>
<td>March 21\textsuperscript{st}</td>
<td>Chicken pox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atterally</td>
<td>March 20\textsuperscript{th} at 3 A.M.</td>
<td>March 20\textsuperscript{th}</td>
<td>General Debility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madhub Lohar</td>
<td>March 20\textsuperscript{th} at 1 P.M.</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>General Debility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shittoo Adhir</td>
<td>March 20\textsuperscript{th} at midnight</td>
<td>March 26\textsuperscript{th}</td>
<td>Debility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdool Aziz</td>
<td>March 21\textsuperscript{st} at 1 A.M.</td>
<td>March 23\textsuperscript{rd}</td>
<td>Phthisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khedree Dome</td>
<td>March 22\textsuperscript{nd} at 5 A.M.</td>
<td>March 21\textsuperscript{st}</td>
<td>Chicken pox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sitto Khan</td>
<td>March 20\textsuperscript{th} at 1 A.M.</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhundoo Kahar</td>
<td>April 1\textsuperscript{st} at 11 A.M.</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Report of Cholera in Alipore Prison, 1875.
This report, submitted by the prison chief shows that the prisoners were suffering from general debility, chicken pox, and phthisis, and not cholera. In some cases, like that of Sitto Khan and Bhundoo Kahar, the guards completely ignored the attack of cholera and reported that the health of the prisoners was “good”.

The findings of the cholera enquiry committees both in Russel Street and the Alipore Prison served a broader colonial purpose of portraying Bengali neighborhoods as the epicenter of disease. The commissioners argued that the “filthy” and “closely packed” houses of the Bengalis deteriorated the epidemic constitution of the city. Conservancy work, they explained, was impossible in the mosaic-like, densely packed houses of the Bengalis where filth lay unattended for days. Refusing to accept the germ theory of cholera, they traced epidemics to these “filthy houses and streets” of the black town.67

Sanitary Commissioner, C. H. Banks, for instance, reported extraordinary amounts of filth accumulating in the “closely packed spaces of Indian houses”. On one occasion, he described a lane between two houses filled with refuse, nine feet high.68 He wrote that he had to climb a ladder to get to the top of the pile. On a second occasion, in Cotton Street, he employed workers to clean a lane so narrow that the men had to pass through a private room and squeeze through a back window to reach a privy.

What the health officers described as “close-packing” was in fact a spatial custom common among the Bengalis. Unlike Europe, where men and women lived away from the business districts, the Bengalis preferred living close to their workplace. Business districts Barra Bazaar and Jorabagan were also popular as residential neighborhoods. In these spaces, land prices were high. The families of the Bengalis, on the other hand, kept growing as distant relatives, friends, and
domestic helps lived together. Big families living in expensive plots of land resulted in back-to-back houses. Without explaining these circumstances, the health officers simply argued that close packing resulted from the Bengalis lack of hygiene.

Surveying the “closely packed” houses, health officers described courtyards as the most insanitary part of these houses. Health officer Simpson, for instance, argued that courtyards were “repositories of shit”. He wrote that it was the Indian habit to throw shit in the courtyard. As close packing made conservancy difficult, filth and shit lay unattended in the courtyard for months:

Refuse is thrown from whatever part of the house they occupy into the courtyard in the centre of the house, or into passage to which neither light nor fresh air can have access, the filthy condition of both, the close proximity of the houses to one another and their overcrowded state combine to form conditions that render proper sanitation impossible.

Simpson submitted his report in 1896, a year before the state constituted the Building Commission. By then, courtyards had repeatedly resisted the excavation of the subterranean sewers in the Indian neighborhoods. Simpson’s report, describing courtyards as receptacles of filth, and a major obstacle to conservancy, rationalized the Building Commission’s efforts to do away with these.

The crafting of a black town in the health reports reached its climax with the outbreak of plague. Health officers traced plague to the houses of the Marwaris, a powerful community of Indian trades who lived in Barra Bazaar. In the late nineteenth century, the Marwaris controlled a significant part of the cotton trade in Calcutta. They were wealthy, and their trade was the biggest competition that the British had in the city. Describing Marwari houses and warehouses as the breeding grounds of plague, the British tried to displace their trade.

For instance, health officers ordered the Marwaris to terminate their trade with Bombay as this brought plague to Calcutta. They identified the son of a
Marwari trader, Giga, as the first victim of plague. Medical officers explained that the boy had contracted plague in Bombay and brought the disease with him to Calcutta. Within a week, they traced plague to another young Marwari boy who lived in Armenian Street. He was the son of a Marwari family who imported cotton and mangoes from Bombay. When the health officers identified plague in this boy, they immediately ordered all Marwaris to suspend their trade with Bombay.

Marwari neighborhoods were in fact at the center of colonial portrayals of the black town. With the outbreak of plague, health officers forced entry into the Marwari houses, shops, and warehouses. Inspecting these spaces, they discovered several sources of disease: filth, dead rats, and decaying matters. Following from this, they described these spaces as “plague spots” and ordered the owners to shut them down.

Surveying Marwari houses, the health officers prepared “plague maps”. These maps provided the commissioners with detailed information on the spatial patterns of Marwari neighborhoods: the location of houses, streets, sewers, warehouses, water tanks, and stables. As visual and graphic formats, the plague maps were instrumental in crafting the black town. While documenting the spatial patterns, the maps also produced new knowledge of the territory.

For example, in 1898, sanitary commissioner Nield Cook prepared a plague map of a Marwari neighborhood or moholla in Jorabagan. This map documented the spatial patterns of the moholla. It showed dwelling houses bordering warehouses and cowsheds. It also showed the location of temples, and the directions of streets and sewers. At the same time, the map described the moholla as the breeding ground of plague. With the help of arrows, Cook showed the spaces where plague first took
shape and the directions in which it spread. As he pointed out, warehouses produced plague from where it spread to the Marwari houses.

Figure 7: Plague in the moholla, the routes of plague in native neighborhoods. Map by Nield Cook, 1898

To reduce the ravages of plague, health commissioners ordered the Marwaris to seal their stores and warehouses. In Burtolla Street, when the Marwaris refused to close their warehouses, the improvement commissioners employed “cleansing gangs” to sanitize these.\textsuperscript{72} Groups of roughly two hundred workers followed the commissioners into the warehouses. They whitewashed the walls, treated the floors with lime, and for days, kept these warehouses closed to the owner and the public. Once they had shut down these warehouses, the gangs forced entry into the Marwari houses. When the Marwaris resisted, the commissioners deployed the police to clear the way for the cleansing gangs.\textsuperscript{73} They argued that the police was needed to clean the “unimaginable filthy premises”\textsuperscript{74} of Marwari houses and clear the sewers “that had not been cleaned for years”\textsuperscript{75}.

In August 1898, based on an “anonymous postcard” the commissioners invaded the house of the Marwari trader Shiu Dayal in Roop Chand Street.\textsuperscript{76} They inspected the interiors and argued that the rooms violated the basic principles of sanitation. They then ordered the residents to evacuate the house at once. After a
week, they ordered all Marwaris who lived in the neighborhood to leave their houses. They turned a nearby hospital at Marcus Square into a temporary shelter for the two hundred expelled Marwaris.

Besides trying to displace Marwari trade, the British also condemned the Marwaris for their lack of hygiene. That the cleansing gangs had to “force in” showed that though sanitary conditions had deteriorated, “ignorant Indians” continued to resist improvements. It is noteworthy here that the health officers used “Indians” instead of “Marwaris” to argue that the lack of hygiene plagued neighborhoods of not simply the Marwaris, but all Indians: the filth of Marwari houses represented the filth of Indian houses. The health officers then engaged in “reducing the use of cesspits, restricting the night-soil collectors, and closing the communal places for defecation”. In such assurance, they described these insanitary practices as widely prevalent in Indian neighborhoods.

In the late nineteenth century health discourses, “filthy” Marwari neighborhoods, and evacuation as the only means of disease prevention, were common themes. Colonial surveys produced large amounts of filth that empowered the health officers to force entry into the Marwari houses. The colonial targeting of the Marwari neighborhoods, the force with which the health officers broke into these warehouses, stores, and ordered evacuations, showed that these attacks were well-planned efforts to uproot Marwari trade.

These plague prevention measures that the state employed to uproot Marwari trade, puts to question the idea of collaboration - between the state and Indian elites - that many historians have seen in town improvements. For instance, Rajnarayan Chandavarkar had described a nexus between the elites, merchant princes, and the state in ordering city space in Bombay. He described plague as “the moment”
when the elites moved closer to the state, demanding that they get the better parts of the city to build their houses. In recent times, the works of William Glover\textsuperscript{79} and Preeti Chopra\textsuperscript{80} have described city building as a joint enterprise, where Indians successfully inserted their agenda in colonial town planning.

In contrast, plague prevention mechanisms in Calcutta point to vast demolitions of private property that spared neither the middle classes, nor the elites. Widely different from the collaborative city building processes that scholars have underlined, demolitions narrate a different story in Calcutta. The indiscriminate demolitions of the Trust did not protect the elites. Instead, the commissioners refused to hear their grievances and destroyed ancestral mansions, as well as stores that were centers of business. To justify these demolitions they argued that these were required to control plague.

Meanwhile, photographs of filth and excreta added to the ongoing production of a black town in the colonial health reports. As Christopher Pinney has pointed out, photographs provided the colonial state with the most authentic information of the Indians.\textsuperscript{81} The British employed photographs to categorize, index, and \textit{know} the natives. As the health reports show, photographs did not simply contribute to the colonizers \textit{knowing} of native space, but also \textit{produced} this space by selectively representing it. As I will argue, photographs colonized space by atomizing them: eliminating cultural contexts, these invested space with new meanings.

Photographs of Indian neighborhoods in the health reports zoomed into the privies. In 1884, medical officer Dr. G. Brien surveyed Bengali houses and argued that it was impossible to build modern privies in these.\textsuperscript{82} He explained that the
existing drop privies - constructed on the plan of a drop through a shaft at one end - covered not only the hut with excreta, but immersed the entire neighborhood in shit.

A few years later, Brien’s observations informed health officer W. J. Simpson’s report on the health of Calcutta (1897). Simpson was a specialist in tropical medicine and had conducted considerable research in the origins of epidemics. He worked as health officer in Aberdeen, London, and Calcutta. In Aberdeen, surveying the docks, he argued,

Disease is no respector of rank…..no one is safe even in the better class houses. One section of the society is intimately connected to the other…..and what affects one quickly affects the other.

In Calcutta, his ideas rationalized British interventions in the Bengali neighborhoods. Simpson carried out exhaustive surveys to determine the conditions of Indian houses. He used photographs to provide evidence of the insanitary privies that made these houses a threat to the health of the city. Figure (8) is an example of a photograph that Simpson used to describe the insanitary conditions of privies in Bengali houses.

Figure 8: Photograph of Privy Vaults and receptacles of an upper story building. Report on Health of Calcutta, W. J. Simpson, 1887.
In this photo, the window marked (1) is the privy. The photo atomizes the privy by completely dissociating it from the rest of the house. The privy can be seen from the outside, and the inside appears dark.

Simpson provides very little evidence to attest that the structure is actually a privy. The possibility that the room is not a privy is corroborated by its location inside the house, and that too on an upper storey. The Bengali custom was to build privies outside the house. A small passage usually separated it from the inner quarters that had the kitchens and bedrooms. In the photo, the room marked privy is on the first floor of the house, which means that it is located well inside the residential quarter.

Whether or not the room is a privy can hardly be ascertained. However, what the photograph really puts forward is a picture of the actual living environment of the Bengalis, marked by its lack of “permanent” structures. The space presented in the photograph is entirely makeshift: a pole left unused, an open space yet to be built, thatched roofs and matted construction that exemplify transient characters. This *kutcha* or makeshift environment contrasted the large and permanent structures of the European town. The difference exemplified in this way, conveyed the message that the Bengalis were indeed inferior and less evolutionarily advanced as they lacked the technology or intellectual capability to build permanent structures.

The photo was then meant to portray the failure of the Bengalis to build their houses and also order the surroundings in permanent ways. The photograph portrayed their spatial practices as unscientific, makeshift, and through it, entailed a systemic disempowerment of the Bengalis in the city.
Similar to Figure (8), Figure (9) also shows upper storey privies (marked 1 and 2). Simpson argued that the location of these privies, the pipes that carried soiled water, and the privy vaults were all improperly built.

This photo, however, does not explain why he described these structures as improper, other than the fact that these were all *kutcha*. He described that the pipes splashed dirty water on the streets below, creating pools of stinking water. The photograph, however, does not show this pool of water. Instead, it clearly shows a *mehtranee* (janitor), carrying the filth in a bucket over her head, possibly to empty it in the main sewers.

Simpson photographed verandas, arguing that the Bengalis used these as privies. He explained that the verandahs had openings for fecal matter, urine, and water. A receptacle placed below received the excreta. He argued that as the verandas had varying heights, the filth often missed its destination and soiled the ground below.
Simpson used Figure (10) as an example of a veranda-privy. He wrote:

> It is hardly safe for an Inspector to go very near when the door is open; the splashes warn him to make hasty retreat. The stench issuing from the chamber is sickening, the pollution of air being intense.\(^{86}\)

This photograph, similar to the earlier ones, does not show excreta splashing on the streets. Neither does it show the pipes leaking and filth collecting on the ground below. There is in fact very little evidence in the photo to indicate that the veranda is actually a privy.

All three photographs, however, are similar in portraying the *kutcha* structures of Bengali houses. Simpson condemned the Bengalis for building these impermanent structures. According to him, *kutcha* structures made the neighborhoods filthy, and spread disease. These arguments against *kutcha* structures took shape at the time when the Building commission was ordering mass demolition of these huts. As Simpson described *kutcha* huts as insanitary, he provided a reason for the demolitions.

Filth that the photographs had set out to document ultimately became invisible in these. Instead, the photographs fed an unhealthy discourse of British superiority in hygiene and sanitation. The photos, along with the accompanying
texts, portrayed the Bengalis as incapable of managing filth. Arguing that the Indian neighborhoods were covered in excreta, the health discourses explained the British as the only source of hope for the Bengalis. In such efforts, the meaning of these photographs was contingent on the ways in which the health officers interpreted them. For instance, pointing to the photographs, Simpson argued that concrete structures should replace *kutcha* huts to improve the health of the city.

As Dipesh Chakraborty has argued, it is the modern order of things that translates difference as premodernity. In a similar way, the language of town improvements translated the different spatial practices of the Bengalis as premodern. The discursive production of the “black town” entailed a hierarchy of space and spatial practices in which Indian customs occupied the lowest rung. Along with textual descriptions of filthy streets that bred disease, photographs produced the image of a space carved by people unaware of hygiene. This space, or the black town, emerged as a central element in the colonial arguments for restructuring Bengali neighborhoods. Yet, colonialism could never completely erase Bengali customs, which resurfaced to shape a Hindu city in the years that followed.

**IV. The Ratepayers and a Hindu City**

As the black town took shape in the colonial health reports, a new critique surfaced in the writings of a group of Bengali men who called themselves “ratepayers”. They were typically English educated, urban, professional Bengalis who paid taxes for town improvements. They argued that because they paid taxes, they should have more voice in the crafting of town improvements. In such arguments, they employed the language of town improvements to negotiate colonial authority and go beyond their ranks of mere subject population. The question of rights, however, did not feature in their discourses and they were far from citizens.
But paying taxes, they were the ratepayers, with roles more than helpless subjects of colonialism.

The ratepayer critique took place in their writings in Bengali and English periodicals. They also met with the Building Commission to engage in discussions on spatial practices fit for the city. As I will argue, their critique of colonial town improvements took shape in two stages. In the first stage, they agreed with the improvement commissioners that the Bengali neighborhoods were indeed insanitary. They supported the state efforts to sanitize the city, build new streets, ventilate Bengali houses, and improve the sewer system. With the state grafting improvements, they, however, started to question the purpose of town improvements. They argued that these improvements violated the Hindu customs that governed spatial practices of the Bengalis.

In 1874, a cartoon published in the Bengali periodical Basantak showed the Hindu component in the ratepayer discourses on town improvements.

![Figure 11: The Varaha avatar as depicted in a Hindu calendar, and the cartoon in Basantak, Vol.1, 1874](image)

The cartoon showed the Hindu deity Vishnu, in his Varaha Avataar, or reincarnation as a boar. As Hindu myths recount, Vishnu in his Varaha Avataar defeated the demon Hiranyaksha, and rescued the earth from the bottom of the
ocean. The *Varaha Avataar* shows Vishnu holding the earth on his tusk. In the cartoon, town improvements replace the earth on Vishnu’s tusk.

In place of the earth, the cartoon shows Vishnu holding drainage, tramways, bazaars, and taxes on his tusk. The Justices of Peace and a British bureaucrat stand at his feet, offering their prayers. Vishnu appears rescuing town improvements from them, raising it high on his tusk. The cartoon portrays the Hindu deity in control of town improvements; in other words, it shows that only the Hindu deity could save the city from the forceful improvements of the state.

The Hindu point of view of the ratepayers is even clearer in their argument that Calcutta was earlier a sanitary city that the Muslim rule made insanitary. They explained that the Muslims, “inherently filthy”, failed to plan a scientific city: the sewers leaked and filth covered the streets. They argued that the colonial rule restored the practices of scientific town planning. But colonial town plans, with their overt reliance on science, left little space for religion.

The ratepayers argued that spatial hygiene was certainly not new to the Hindus. The scriptures had several sections on the benefits of sanitary living. In 1898, Saratchandra Mullick, who identified himself as a ratepayer, wrote in the journal *Lancet*:

> Disinfection is an every day practice; isolation is an ancient custom; inoculation is immemorial. So that in principle, there is nothing, which can be called an innovation [of the colonial state].

Describing the colonial town improvements, he, however, pointed out,

> What the people object to—and what self-respecting nation would not—is the arbitrary and high-handed manner in which the orders of the Government are executed. I do not say that it was the intention of the Government that its officers should ride rough shod over the people; far from it. But it is notorious fact that the feelings of the people are grievously trampled upon.
To stop the state from “trampling upon the feelings of the people”, the ratepayers engaged in a dialogue with the town improvement committees. Resisting colonial portrayals of a Bengali population unaware of hygiene, they argued that Hindu religion had always inspired the Bengalis to plan their houses and neighborhoods in scientific ways. Right from the dawn of civilization, Hindu rishis (saints) had instructed men to use the natural resources - soil, river, fountains, and air – in useful ways. Additionally, the Shastras inspired individuals to maintain good svasthya (health) and the Hindu text Charaksanghita had several sections on hygiene.

In arguing that the state ‘trampled on the feelings of the city dwellers’, the ratepayers meant that it disregarded popular customs while carrying out town improvements. Following from this, they described their role as overseeing colonial town improvements to make these compatible with Hindu spatial customs.

The ratepayers argued that the state should not execute town improvements that tried to transform the cultural practices of the Bengalis. They pointed out that the payment of municipal taxes made the relations between the city dwellers and the state more participatory. Receiving tax from the people, the commissioners were answerable to them. Their effort to describe Bengali customs as backward, and curb their role in the government, was therefore uncalled-for. Instead, the ratepayers argued that the state should plan town improvements that did not deracinate prevailing customs.

With this goal, they launched a movement against the disappearing courtyards. As the Building Commission ordered homeowners to cover up their courtyards, the ratepayers invoked the sanitary laws of Raja Vikramaditya to argue that Hindu spatial customs required all houses to have courtyards.91 Furthermore,
they argued that Hindu customs sanctioned courtyards only in a Suryavedi or north-south direction. Any courtyard running opposite, or in a Chandravedi direction, was flawed. Ratepayers also argued that Hindu customs did not permit the extension of houses to the south. While planning towns and houses, the custom was to keep the Yama Danda and the Surya Danda clear for the passages of air and sunlight.

Jadu Nath Sen, a schoolteacher, added that the Surya Danda had to be left open under all circumstances. If this was not possible, the homeowners had to build doors and windows in a line to allow solar heat. Also, they had to leave the Yama Danda open for the circulation of air. He argued that for purposes of ventilation, the streets had to run in north-south and east-west directions.

Resisting the new regulations of the Building Commission, the ratepayers pointed out that Hindu spatial customs determined the spaces of the Bengali house. The Bengali periodical Svasthyo outlined these customs: poob e hash poschime bansh/ Uttor e guya dokkhine dhhua, which meant that ducks swam in pools to the east of the Bengali houses, to the west were the bamboo trees, and the betel nut trees stood in the south to ensure the easy passage of air. This pattern showed that while building their houses, the Hindus first ensured that there was enough space to excavate the pond, and plant bamboo and betel nut trees.

Adding to this, Babu Kanaye Lall Mukherjee, a lawyer in the Calcutta Police Court, described separate enclaves inside the Hindu house. He explained that these enclaves were necessary for performing religious ceremonies. The Bengalis built a poojah dalaan or an open space in front of the house where they worshipped deities and performed rituals. This space was mostly covered with a natyamandir or chandnee, or simply left open as a quadrangle. The direction of the poojah dalaan was such that when priests sat for ceremonies they faced the north or the east.
inner *dalaan*, in contrast, was a space exclusively for family gatherings. The Bengalis usually built the inner *dalaan* or the second courtyard behind the *poojah daalan*.

Colonial building regulations mandated that for purposes of sanitation, the homeowner had to leave a third of the land on which he built the house open. After leaving a third of the land open, it was difficult to excavate ponds or plant *gubak* trees. It was also unrealistic to build a house with courtyards and *dalaans* on two-thirds of the land. As the ratepayers argued, spatial customs made it impossible for the Bengalis to follow the building regulations.

That being said, the ratepayers envisioned the city in strict Hindu terms. Conflating Bengali spatial practices with Hindu customs, they described Calcutta as a Hindu city. Their writings legitimized certain Hindu spatial customs as norms acceptable in the city. This systematically ignored all other building practices prevalent in the city. To resist grafting, ratepayers reinvented customs and re-imagined the city as Hindu, an idea that gained currency all through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

**V. Conclusion**

The colonial disciplining of the “wild” geography of Calcutta echoed in the social sphere. It relegated the Bengalis to the universe of “ignorant” and “backward”, manifest in the cultural and aesthetic discourses of town improvements. This cultural representation of Indians reached its apotheosis with the commissioning of utilitarian town improvements. The colonial government’s interest in initiating these improvements went beyond eliminating the threats that it posed to the health of the city. Inscribing urban space with symbolic meaning, the state made use of space to serve its ideological and cultural motives.
Taking shape in the colonial health discourses, the black town reflected the British efforts to control, experience, and think about Bengali neighborhoods in ways that justified their rule in the city. The black town contrasted the modern and hygienic spaces of the European districts, and sustained a new hierarchy of race. That the Indians could not plan their neighborhoods marked them as the inferior race. In sharp contrast, the British, initiating new improvements, emerged as the only hope for the Bengalis.

Responding to this asymmetry in the representations of space, the ratepayers expressed their own visions of the city. They were the social actors working within unequal relations of power shaped by colonialism. Yet, their new ideas of spatial hygiene provided them with the chance to negotiate colonial authority. This they did by inventing new spatial practices that marked them as different from the British. They saw in the built environment the possibility to challenge the colonial rule and also keep alive some aspects of the Hindu religion.

Over the twentieth century, colonial efforts to regulate the black town became even more intense. Segregation policies empowered the state to open “breathing” spaces between European and Indian properties, clear the city center, order demolitions, and commission a complete reordering of the city for the purposes of public health. As I will argue, the vision of a Hindu city that took shape in the ratepayer discourses brought together property owners against authoritarian town improvement committees. As Hindu city dwellers, they condemned these committees for disregarding their spatial customs and trampling on their beliefs.
Marathas giving up their raids reached Bengal.


2. In this chapter Calcutta means the geography of all three villages, Sutanuti, Gobindpur, and Kalikata on the eastern banks of river Hooghly. The physical limits of the region in 1794 was the Khari Juri a village in the south; Palta, a village in the north; Bidydhari river in the East, and River Ganges in the West. See, P.T.Nair, Calcutta Municipal Corporation at a glance, (Calcutta : Calcutta Municipal Corp., 1989), 13.


7. The idea of black town here is very similar to the ways in which current discourses on developmentalism produce knowledge of certain countries and populations. This discourse tries to create and nourish a hierarchy that projects the west as the epitome of development and calls for the non-west countries to follow similar government and economic policies. The goal of this discourse is, of course, to open the markets of these countries for the Corporate. To this end, the development discourse describes the non-west as steeped in backwardness. See, Arutro Escobar, Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1995), 44. Escobar explains the role of economists in shaping development discourses that target populations and make them subjects of power.


10. The theme of Indian “rudeness” cuts across all colonial writings on Calcutta. Yet, it is most visible in the writings of James Mill. See, James Mill and William Thomas. The history of British India (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 2. Here Mill described all Indians as primitive and rude.

11. Walter Hamilton. The East-India gazetteer containing particular descriptions of the empires, kingdoms, principalities ... of Hindostan, and the adjacent countries, India beyond the Ganges, and the Eastern Archipelago, together with sketches of the manners, customs, institutions, agriculture ... of their various inhabitants. (London: Printed for Parbury, Allen, and Co, 1828), 10.

12. Ibid, 32


17. The excavation of the Maratha Ditch was incomplete. Work stopped when news of the Marathas giving up their raids reached Bengal.
20 Dinabandhu Chatterjee, *A short sketch of Rajah Rajendro Mullick Bahadur and his family*, (1917), 22
21 Ibid
23 Bengal (India). Second (Third) Report of the Committee appointed by the Right Honourable the Governor of Bengal for the Establishment of a Fever Hospital, and for inquiring into Local Management and Taxation in Calcutta, 1846. Appendix G.
24 Constituted from among the Company’s officials, the Justices of Peace dispensed law, wielded police power, and also engaged in small town improvements.
25 *Minute of the Governor General on the Improvement of Calcutta*, June 16, 1803
27 *Resolution of the Lottery Committee*, December 18, 1817.
29 *Calcutta Journal*, February 16, 1821
30 *Calcutta Journal*, April 16, 1821
31 Bengal (India). *Appendix H to Second report of the Committee upon the Fever Hospital and Municipal Improvements: containing papers selected from the records of the committee appointed to control and direct the execution of Lieutenant J.A. Schalch's plan of a line of canal from the River Hooghly to Koolna*. Calcutta: Bishop's College Press, 1848.
32 “Letter to the Governor General in Council at Fort William from H. Mackenzie, 1818”.
WBSA Files, Judicial (Criminal).
33 “Letter to W. B. Bayley, Secretary to the government, August 1818”. WBSA Files, Judicial (Criminal).
34 *Calcutta Journal of Medicine*, 1906
35 Letter of D. M. Farlan to residents of Boithokkhana, December 1, 1833, WBSA Files, (Military).
36 Bengal (India). *Rules, Ordinances, and Regulations for the good order and civil government of the United Company's Settlement at Fort William in Bengal passed by the Governor-General in Council, of and for the Presidency of Fort William in Bengal, and registered in the supreme court of judicature, now in force, for the years, 1802, 1814, 1816-21, 1823, 1825, 1827, and 1829, with an index*, 1830.
38 *Minute by President of the Sanitary Commission for Bengal*, March 5, 1864, an Appendix in the *Annual report of the Sanitary Commissioner for Bengal*, (Calcutta: Printed at the Bengal Secretariat Press, 1867).
40 Ibid.
43 Ibid, 3
44 Ibid
Memorandum by William Clark", September 1871, in A collection of papers relating to the drainage system of Calcutta carried out by W. Clark, 1869-1871.
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Martin, Notes on the Medical Topography, 23.
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Cook, Report of the Health Officer for Calcutta, 1897, 78-79.
Ibid, 57.
Ibid, 15.
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Indian Medical Gazette, XXXIII, September 9,1893.
Report on Plague in Calcutta for the year ending 30th June 1904, 4.
William J. Glover, Making Lahore modern constructing and imagining a colonial city. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008),15. Through an analysis of space in colonial Lahore, Glover describes both the Indians and the British contributing to shape a distinct modernity.
Preeti, Chopra. A joint enterprise Indian elites and the making of British Bombay. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 67. Chopra argues that the crafting of the colonial city was a “joint enterprise” between the Indian elites and the British.
85 Ibid
89 *Lancet*, November 5, 1898.
90 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
93 “Hindur Bastu”, *Svasthya*, vol. 2, 97-110.
Chapter II

The Planned City: Calcutta Improvement Trust and the Paras

In the late eighteenth century, when Mughal emperor Aurangzeb granted trading rights to the EIC, they immediately built a port in Calcutta. Ships were the most efficient means of transporting goods at this time. The Company chose the head of river Hooghly, the most upstream site, to build the port. Within a few years, the port transformed Calcutta into Europe’s chief supplier of iron, coal, and cotton. All through the nineteenth century, the port expanded with the technology of enclosed docks and construction of piers and jetties. In addition, town improvement committees built new roads, widened streets, and cleared congestions to speed up the port bound traffic. In the early twentieth century, the First World War further boosted the expansion of the port. The war led to new factories along the riverbanks that supplied Europe with wartime materials.

Meanwhile, famines ravaged the Bengal countryside in the late nineteenth century. With repeated crop failures, the rural population saw in the expanding ports and small factories of Calcutta means of gainful employment. They moved to the city in large numbers, leading to a demographic explosion. Faced with the steady influx of men and women from the countryside, the state failed to house them. As thousands remained homeless in the city, a housing crisis gripped Calcutta.

Driven by the twin desires of improving public housing and clearing street congestion, the state commissioned the Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) in 1911. This Trust was visibly different from the nineteenth century improvement committees. Focusing more on town improvements, the nineteenth century committees did not try to “plan” the city. The CIT, on the other hand, was the first committee that actually engaged in “planning” Calcutta. It described its goals as
ordering the city to speed up circulation, open squares for ventilation, and also house the city dwellers in hygienic ways.

I will argue that although the CIT resolved to plan Calcutta, it tried to restructure the city to eliminate all threats to the political stability of the state. In other words, CIT was the colonial tool to make the city resistant to anti-colonial outbreaks. Several anti colonial uprisings had shaken the foundations of the state in the early twentieth century Calcutta; these included the Swadeshi movement, which saw the Bengalis pouring into the streets, barricading it, and combating colonial troops. The narrow lanes in the Bengali neighborhoods worked in favor of the protestors. They quickly set up barricades and the British troops failed to disperse the crowds. Responding to this, the CIT planned wide asphalt streets cutting through the Bengali neighborhoods. Opening Bengali neighborhoods for colonial surveillance, these streets were also too wide to barricade.

At the same time, the CIT built streets to sanitize Calcutta physically, as well as racially. Rebuilding the core of the city, it forced the Bengalis to move to the south. By the early twentieth century, the urban core at Dalhousie Square housed government offices, business firms, and credit unions. The Hong Kong and Shanghai banks had built new high rises there. In Clive Street, concrete offices of several large firms had replaced existing buildings. Seats of government - the Government House, Customs House, and the High Court - clustered in this region. The CIT proposed a network of new streets to connect this region to the port and the railway terminus. This plan required demolition of all Bengali houses that stood in the way. Demolishing these houses, the CIT opened “suburbs” in the southern parts of Calcutta, exiling the Bengalis away from the core.
The town plans of the CIT shaped multiple levels of segregation along race and class. It purged the Bengalis from the urban core, separating their residential districts from that of the British, and within the Bengali community, segregated the rich from the poor. The demolition of Bengali houses and the carving of the south suburban municipality accelerated the geographic polarization among the Bengalis, forcing the wealthy to move to the south, and the poorer to the fringes of the city. Although the state incorporated the south suburban municipality into the city proper, it refused to provide comparable services to these new territories. Overcrowding, shoddy constructions for the poor, and the geographical separation of the Bengalis continued to plague the southern suburbs. Additionally, the CIT demolished all old structures – houses, streets, and markets – to make way for the new.

Public purpose, or the idea of common good, empowered the CIT to acquire and demolish private properties. The commissioners argued that these demolitions would improve sanitation and benefit the Bengalis. Faced with these authoritarian schemes, property owners employed new strategies to resist the interventions of the CIT. Observing that the CIT steered clear of religious structures to avoid communal outbreaks, they invested their properties with religious meanings. They explained that these investitures had “public” value and, therefore, were inalienable. To this end, they drummed up their neighborhood or para to provide evidence of “publicness”.

In Calcutta, the neighborhood or the para (from Sanskrit Pará, meaning a small village), more than physical space, is a spatial community based on kin like ties. Planners do not plan its spaces, nor does the state decide its physical boundaries. Instead, the para is a caste (profession) based community that preserves the social space of the village in the city.
As I will argue, everyday negotiations between the para and the CIT crafted the contours of a Hindu community different from the nationalist imaginations. Far from ideas of cohesion that formed the core of the nationalist visions of community, middle class property owners mobilized their Hindu identities to resist authoritarian town improvements in their paras. In such efforts, their Hindu identities were their tactics to resist state encroachment and acquisition of private properties. At the same time, the abstract concepts of state obligations to citizens, communities based on religion, the demarcation of public/private took shape in their petitions and meetings in the mundane spaces of the para.

To protect their properties from state acquisition, property owners described these as debutter, or plots of land that belonged to the deity, and were inalienable. They solicited their para to support these claims of publicness. The para then provided evidence that temples, courtyards, and gardens inside residential premises also had public value. They argued that as meeting points of the para dwellers, these spaces brought them together as a Hindu community.

The struggle to protect property then transformed to a struggle to protect religion and identity. The para engaged in protracted debates with the CIT over meanings of religious investitures. Occasionally, they brought in experts to prove that their Hindu identities were contingent on structures that the CIT planned to destroy. In such arguments, the para refashioned itself as a Hindu community.

I. Calcutta Improvement Trust and Planning Calcutta

In the late nineteenth century, Herbert Risley, a British ethnographer, had carried out extensive surveys of Indian tribes. He was the first among the colonialists to argue the importance of caste in understanding the Indian society. A few years later, in 1905, with the ravages of the plague still fresh, Risley argued that
the pressure of population was slowly eating away Calcutta’s urban core.\textsuperscript{10} To ensure the city’s expansion in meaningful ways, he recommended opening suburbs to house the excess population. He suggested that a town improvement trust with absolute powers to acquire land both in Calcutta and the suburbs was the need of the hour.

Following Risley’s advice, the colonial state commissioned the CIT in 1911 and invested it with powers to acquire all lands in the city. From the earliest days, the CIT worked under direct supervision of the Bengal Government. Of the eleven members that comprised its Board of trustees, the Bengal government appointed the Chairman and four other members, the municipal corporation elected three members, and the Bengal chamber of commerce and the National Chamber of Commerce appointed a member each.

Earlier in 1882, the Indian Trusts Act had defined the “trust” as an “obligation of ownership of property, arising out of a confidence reposed in and accepted by the owner for the benefit of another individual or group”.\textsuperscript{11} A trust could be created to transfer property to a beneficiary. The Act mandated reclaiming “perishable property” or “property that was going into waste” by constituting a trust for its proper management. The Act also empowered the trustees to sell land by public auction. The Act, however, did not have any provisions to reorder religious holdings under personal laws or local customs, nor could it be applied to public or private religious or charitable endowments.

The Calcutta Improvement Act (1911) amended the shortcomings of the Indian Trusts Act. The state invested the trust with the Land Acquisition Act of 1894, empowering it to acquire all lands, public, private, and religious. As a land trust, the CIT hoarded land on behalf of the state.\textsuperscript{12}
A year before the CIT took shape, E. P. Richards, chief engineer of the Trust, surveyed Calcutta to determine the routes along which the city could expand. Working with a small staff of two Indian surveyors and an Indian clerk, Richards frequently complained about the impossibility of planning a city that housed a quarter million people and a geography that spanned thirty thousand acres of land. It took him fifteen months, a physical breakdown, and a forced departure from the city to actually submit his report.

The hundreds of plans and visions in Richards’ report can be grouped into two categories: first he tried to improve the hygiene and sanitation of the city, and second, he tried to improve business and commerce. That he hoped to accomplish all this by tearing up many of the old, twisting streets and houses, and replacing these with wide asphalt streets and spacious squares also reflected his ambitions of making the city revolution free.

In Richards’ plans, wide right-angled streets and speedy double track tramways connected the business districts with the port and the railways terminuses. Wide streets along the river also opened new wharves, warehouses, and landing depots. This made the river more navigable. Meanwhile, the new streets mounted the port as the nucleus of urban life, reconfiguring all other spaces around it. Earlier, the port had been a thriving center for commerce, but did not determine the city’s overall spatial patterns. Richards plan inscribed on land a “value” determined by its proximity to the port. As he argued, the “valuable parts” of the city, would grow as intense spaces of commerce placed within easy access to the port and railways.

Richards described the intermingling of business and residential premises in Indian neighborhoods as the reason for congestion. Broad streets in his plan then segregated the city into specialized and controlled districts for work, home, and
leisure. Along the west banks of the river Hooghly where ships, pilgrims, and traders assembled, he envisioned a modern industrial district. He wrote to the state to take necessary steps to disperse the crowd and develop the riverbank as an industrial zone. Within the city, he proposed to open the city center for banks and government offices. He planned a network of modern asphalt streets with speedy tramways to connect these districts. He also proposed the building of pavements along these streets to stop pedestrians from holding up traffic.

At the same time, Richards argued that the old, winding alleys of the Bengali neighborhoods threatened the stability of the state. These twisting streets, he explained, shielded Bengali houses from state view. For that reason, these houses were ideal for anti-state activities. On several occasions, he warned that revolutions could easily brew in these houses as the streets made it difficult for the troops to control the situation. He feared that the Bengalis would effortlessly block the narrow approaches to their houses and stop the British troops from entering these.

The new streets that Richards planned were significantly wider than the existing streets. These passed through the heart of the Bengali neighborhoods, making it impossible for the Bengalis to set up barricades. Under the guise of improving social and sanitary conditions, these streets improved troop movement. The straightness allowed artillery to fire on rioting crowds. A small number of large, open intersections allowed easy control by a small force. In addition, the Bengalis could no longer use the buildings, set back from the center of the street, as fortifications.

Arguing in favor of a network of wide streets, Richards plan also showed how bad the state of the city was when he arrived in Calcutta. The city’s own history then played very little role in molding his plans. Instead, he endorsed new networks
of circulation and security, placing little importance on the aesthetic appreciation of
the lived environment of the old city.

**Asphalt streets and Re-ordering the City**

Within a few years of its foundation, the CIT planned streets notable for their wide stretches and asphalt surfaces that lend crispness to geometry. The streets, capacious corridors, made way for speedy coaches and traffic. These broad and light-filled thoroughfares also embodied multiple purposes that underlay the work of the CIT. Angled across existing streets and linking together at diagonals, these streets permitted the speedy transport of goods and services around town. The wide stretches also demolished the troublesome neighborhoods where rebellions traditionally fomented and facilitated the quick deployment of troops.

These streets, astonishing architectural intrusions, destroyed everything that fell in its way: houses, stores, people, markets, and schools. It indiscriminately razed old buildings as the commissioners described these as “dangerous encroachments”\(^{18}\). Most of these houses belonged to the Indians who according to Richards, were “dangerous classes” taking their complaints to the streets. As the CIT report shows, it demolished all Indian houses that stood near the city center and forced the homeowners to move to the south. Relocating Indians from the center to the periphery meant that their revolts would now happen there, and would not impact the business district.

Making way for a modern and symmetrical Calcutta, the CIT also saw in the new streets a possibility of eliminating all competition to its trade. In the early nineteenth century, the Marwaris were powerful Indian merchants who controlled the cotton trade of Calcutta. In 1900, a Marwari Chamber of Commerce had taken shape, which controlled eighty percent of the cotton trade in the city.\(^{19}\) A few years
after it took shape, the traders petitioned the state to change the system of arbitration of business disputes in practice in the city. This, however, was a demand that the state refused to accept. The state realized that giving up its power in resolving disputes could prove fatal for its trade. It refused to change the arbitration policies, and this soured its relation with the Marwaris.

From the late nineteenth century, the British had in fact made several attempts to displace the networks of Marwari trade. With the plague outbreak, health commissioners had discovered infected rats in Marwari warehouses and argued that these were breeding centers of disease. Following from this, they had ordered the Marwaris to close their warehouses. These efforts, however, had met with little success. In the early twentieth century, Marwari neighborhoods still remained bustling centers of Indian commerce.

One of the earliest town plans of the CIT centered on the Marwari neighborhood of Barra Bazaar. In 1915, the CIT appointed the Scottish planner Patrick Geddes to reorder Barra Bazaar as a “modern business district”. Geddes was at the time formulating his own ideas of town planning. He argued that planning should be organic and should preserve local customs. With the goal of preserving the spatial customs of the Marwaris, Geddes undertook several surveys of Barra Bazaar. He walked the streets and the by-lanes, entered every house and office, and met with the local residents to shape his new plan.

The CIT, however, rejected the plan that Geddes submitted. It argued that the plan did not sufficiently open up Barra Bazaar. Instead, it planned for a sixty feet wide thoroughfare through the heart of Barra Bazaar connecting it to the nearby ghat or landing dock at Nimtola. This new boulevard required the demolition of several Marwari houses that fell on its way. The commissioners inspected these houses and
described them as insanitary “encroachments”, dangerous for the health of the city. They argued that to clear congestion and build a modern boulevard, these houses had to be demolished.

In June 1919, the Marwari traders demonstrated against the demolition scheme of the CIT. Iron merchant HariHor Sett led these protests. He argued that the CIT’s plan to demolish Marwari houses would not only leave hundreds of Marwaris homeless, but also displace their trade. He explained that for the Marwaris, the home was also the workplace; they usually built their shops and offices in floors below where they lived. This unique intersection of business and residential premise was key to their success in trade. The proximity of home and workplace allowed them to work longer hours. The family also supported the business by providing additional labor. For the Marwaris, demolition of the house, therefore, meant displacement of their business. Demonstrating against the CIT, the merchants demanded that it withdraw its plans in Barra Bazaar.

The protests, however, failed to convince the CIT to give up its plan. The commissioners ignored the merchants, describing them as naïve and infantile. They argued that the merchants were too naïve to even realize that the new street would in fact benefit them. As the commissioners explained, the new street would facilitate rapid transit to the port, speeding up trade.

Far from benefitting the Indians, the new street added to the congestion that the Trust had set out to clear. To clear the main stretch of the road for motor vehicles, the Trust had built pavements on the street sides. To reduce expenses, it had built the pavements narrow. This meant that while walking on the pavements, physical contact between pedestrians was common. For this reason, the Indians considered the pavements polluting: they refused to walk in such close proximity
with members of other castes and religion. Instead, they stayed off the pavement and chose to walk on the main stretch of the road reserved for motor vehicles. This led to further congestion and frequent accidents.

Notwithstanding the failure of the new streets, the CIT continued demolishing houses and building streets. One of the major north-south thoroughfares that it built was the Central Avenue. A modern avenue with wide stretches for motor vehicles, the Central Avenue promised better connections between the northern and southern parts of the city. The Trust installed electric lights along some parts of the avenue and gaslights on the other. This made it possible for the state to police the streets even after dark. Along the streets, the CIT made provisions for parks and squares to keep space open for the deployment of troops.

The Central Avenue was instrumental in facilitating the colonial takeover of land from the Indians at the city center. Ancestral houses of the Bengalis stood on plots of land where the CIT planned to widen the avenue. As construction work proceeded, the CIT demolished these structures and rejected all petitions against these demolitions. Protap Chandra Roy and Nando Lal Basak, both homeowners, lived in the neighborhood and sent several petitions to the CIT to not acquire their properties. They explained that their ancestral houses were their bastubhita: these were not simply residential premises but also sources of income. These houses were large, with many rooms that the homeowners rented out at monthly rates. Demolition of the houses meant both the loss of a residential premise, and a loss of income.

Evicting the Indian population from the city center, the CIT opened new residential suburbs in the south. In 1897, British planner Ebenezeer Howard had planned garden cities as self-contained communities surrounded by greenbelts,
containing proportionate areas of residences, industry, and agriculture. In the 1920s, the garden city informed the Trust's visions of residential suburbs in south Calcutta.\textsuperscript{34} Known as the south suburban municipality, this new residential suburb spanned the area from the Ballygunj Railway Station to the King George’s dock along the river Hooghly.\textsuperscript{35} Here, the Trust envisioned tree-lined streets, parks, lakes, boulevards for motor vehicles and an efficient network of tramways providing easy access to the city center.

Old Ballygunje Road and Gariahat Road were the key building sites in the south suburbs. The CIT extended Southern Avenue to Gariahat Road developing a big plot of land between Manohorpukur Road and the Lake as a residential belt.\textsuperscript{36} Over the next few years, the Trust extended Southern Avenue eastwards to Gariahat Road expecting that the widened road would later become a main road connecting the southern suburbs to the city center.\textsuperscript{37}

The Central Avenue Scheme resulted in a mass displacement of Bengalis from the central parts of Calcutta to the south. The CIT guaranteed the evictees of the Central Avenue scheme building sites in the south suburban municipality; in Bhowanipur and Russa Road it kept aside plots of land for them.

Far from the Trust’s claims that these regions were “wetlands with hogla bushes” prior to its “development”, Russa Road was actually a densely packed Bengali neighborhood. Here, the Trust forcefully acquired huts and filled up water tanks to open land as future building sites. As is evident from the petitions of Gopal Chandra Sarkar, Khetra Mohan, Bidya Dhori Devi and other residents of the region, the Trust had demolished ancestral houses with surgical precision.\textsuperscript{38}
Table 1: The migration of the population from north to south Calcutta as part of the Trust’s improvement schemes, Annual Report of the C.I.T. (1914-1927).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scheme from which displaced</th>
<th>Scheme in which rehoused</th>
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<tr>
<td>7  (Central Avenue-Machchua Bazaar street to Beadon Street)</td>
<td>5 (Bhowanipur)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7C (Maniktola Spur)</td>
<td>5 (Bhowanipur)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7D (Central Avenue-BowBazaar Street to Prinsep Street)</td>
<td>5 (Bhowanipur)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7B (Central Avenue—Colootollah Street to BowBazaar Street)</td>
<td>4a (Russa Road)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In March 1915, the CIT acquired the ancestral home of Haridas Banerjee to widen an approach to the Central Avenue. As compensation, it offered Banerjee a plot of land in the south suburb. Although he accepted the geographically distant land, Banerjee refused to agree to the small size of the plot. He argued that he needed more land, as customs required him to split his property equally between his three sons. He therefore appealed to the CIT for a bigger plot of land. The Trust, however, informed Banerjee that it could not transfer more land than it had already done. Finally, Banerjee had to buy the extra land at a higher rate.

The plots of land that the CIT reserved for the evictees in the south suburbs were small. In these plots, building houses as big as the ancestral ones was out of the question. Like Banerjee, most of the evictees refused to accept these plots. They argued that with large families and friends living with them, they had to build big houses.

The re-housing policies of the CIT were also not flawless. Even though it assured the evictees of Central Avenue plots of land in the south suburbs, it sold most of these plots to private builders. Receiving plots of land in the southern suburbs, the private builders reordered these spaces according to the convenience of the wealthy Bengalis. The south suburban municipality therefore grew as the...
paradise of the wealthy: villas, mansions and little palaces of the commercial groups populated the neighborhoods. At the heart of the southern suburbs was the Dhakuria Lake. Rowing and cricket clubs crowded the lakesides. The CIT planned gardens and residential areas surrounding the lake.\textsuperscript{42} To preserve greenery, it summoned the curator of the Botanical gardens to plant seedlings of evergreen trees on both sides of the streets. It also sanctioned plans for a strong network of tramways to provide easy access from this region to the city center at Esplanade.

Driving out the Bengalis from the city center, the CIT set up the southern suburbs to contain their residential expansion. The suburbs, built for the evictees of the Central Avenue scheme, ended up housing the wealthy. With the suburbs, the rich, middling, and poor Bengalis could no longer live near the same streets. Poorer Bengalis could not afford to live in the southern suburbs; along with the workers, they moved to the city’s fringes.\textsuperscript{43} Enshrining social strata in architecture, villas and apartments of the rich, and tenements of the working poor now occupied separate parts of the city.

To finance the expansion of the new suburbs, the CIT sold surplus lands to private builders to build apartments. These apartments were mixed structures that housed both residential and business premises. The top floors of these buildings were residential structures, while the floors below were shops and storehouses. The steel structures of these apartments brought about a vertical expansion of the city.

\textbf{Apartments, and Tenements of the Working Poor}

The first apartment or “flat” that came up in Calcutta was in Park Street. Here, the CIT sold building sites to the famous builders Mr. A. Stephen and J. C. Gaulstion.\textsuperscript{44} The builders then built modern flats replacing the ancestral houses of the Bengalis.\textsuperscript{45} Complete with tennis courts and swimming pools, the rents of these
flats were high.\textsuperscript{46} Apartments in the Cohen Mansion on Ripon Street and Elliot Mansion on Elliot Road resembled the rich artisan apartments of England, but their rents were three times that of the English apartments.\textsuperscript{47}

The private builders argued that the apartments had better ventilation than the single-family houses of the Bengalis. Mr. Omari, a builder who built high rises in Park Street and Camac Street explained that these flats had ventilation similar to apartments in London. Omari’s initiatives saw a block of flats, called the Prince’s Mansion overlooking Park Street. Designed by Mr. Huart Webber, Prince’s Mansion was a six-storied building of attractive appearance that was south facing and had well ventilated rooms.

Starting with Park Street and Chowringhee, the CIT also sold building sites to builders to build apartments in the south suburban municipalities of Tollygunj, Ballygunj and Rashbehari Avenue. Writing in 1930, poet Buddhadeb Basu vividly describes his experiences of living in flats in the south suburban municipality. The CIT had earlier filled up a small stream at the heart of Old Ballygunj to construct the wide stretches of Rashbehari Avenue. In the 1930s, with tramlines and tree-lined expanses, Rashbehari Avenue was fast growing as the center of the New Ballygunj neighborhood. From his flat on the Rashbehari Avenue, Basu observed rows of modern flats crowding the New Ballygunj neighborhood. The demographic and structural difference from Old Ballygunj, he wrote, was striking.\textsuperscript{48} Hard working, professional Bengalis, “flat dwellers” lived in these neighborhoods away from the bustle of the city. A labyrinth of trams that ran between Ballygunj and Esplanade carried the flat dwellers to their work places at the city center.

Basu, however, argued that the transformation of new Ballygunj to a modern suburb was only incomplete. The CIT’s rush to open building sites had grossly
neglected the improvement of infrastructure in the region. The Trust did not clear the woods that surrounded the apartments, and wild animals could be seen roaming on the streets.49

Apartment living in the suburbs was not a popular choice among the Bengalis. Instead, they preferred living amidst the bustle of the city, near shops, offices, and crowded streets.50 They lived in apartments only when they did not have a choice.51 The apartments that replaced the single-family houses were shared premises. The residents had to share stairways and terraces with the other castes. This inconvenienced the Bengalis. Further, apartments did not have courtyards. The Bengalis found it difficult to organize worships of their family deities. For all these reasons, they avoided living in the apartments.52

While reserving the south suburban municipality for the affluent Bengalis, the CIT built tenements for the poor in the city’s fringes. By the early twentieth century, town planners in Europe and America had condemned tenements as “hideous and useless”.53 City planners in the United States repeatedly argued that the tenements failed to provide a convenient environment for the moral growth of the citizens. Going against such arguments, the CIT explained, “public housing in other cities, many years ago, is exactly applicable to Calcutta of-today”.54

In 1901, the urban planner Charles Mulford Robinson had called for regulating tenements in cities across India. He described the tenements (chawls) of Bombay, seething in darkness and filth, as an example of the tenement’s inadaptability in the country.55 Arguing that the models of European tenements had failed in India cities, he demanded more regulation. Following Mulford, the Calcutta Municipal Corporation imposed limits on the height of the tenements and fixed the backspace and light angles.
The CIT built several tenements in those parts of Calcutta where land prices were low. Neighborhoods in Ward Institution Lane, Bow Street, and Karbala Tank were away from both the urban core and the south suburbs.\textsuperscript{56} Here the Trust built tenements separated by narrow passages. Each building adjoined buildings of similar nature forming identical blocks. The blocks comprised three-storey buildings, two hundred feet long with rooms 12 feet by 12 feet, with a 4 ft verandah and opening to a central passage 7 feet wide, with bathing accommodations at each ends.\textsuperscript{57} The standard accommodation fixed was three hundred cubic feet for each person.

These tenements segregated the residents along class and religion. In the Wards Institution Lane, the Trust built three blocks to re-house twelve hundred working poor.\textsuperscript{58} The first block exclusively housed clerks, the second housed sweepers, and the third artisans. The Trust also reserved one of the three blocks for housing the Muslim working poor.\textsuperscript{59}

Although the Trust built tenements for the poorer sections of society, it fixed very high rents for these. In Block A of the Ward Institution tenement, the Trust leased let our four shops on the ground floor at rupees 8, twenty four dwellings on the ground floor at rupees 3, and fifty six dwellings on the two top floors at rupees 4.\textsuperscript{60} Because of the high rents, many of the tenements remained empty for months.

Poor infrastructure also made it difficult for the Bengalis to live in these tenements. Ward Institution tenements were in fact infamous for the scarcity of drinking water.\textsuperscript{61} In the block reserved for artisans, water supply was limited to an hour in the morning and evening. In all three blocks, the low pressure of water failed to flush the cisterns. Over the years, occupancy in the tenements decreased, and rent collected dropped by a thousand rupees annually.\textsuperscript{62}
Meanwhile, the CIT commissioned thirty-nine detached houses at Karbala tank to accommodate evictees from its various improvement schemes. These houses, however, housed the evictees on a temporary basis. The Trust encouraged them to build their own houses and move out. Similar to the Ward Institution tenements, the Karbala housing scheme was not popular. The detached houses were in fact semidetached, forcing residents to share premises: stairways and courtyards. In March 1923, several houses remained vacant and the CIT opened them to the public for rents as high as rupees 100 every month.

With the tenements remaining empty for months, the Trust sold these to the general public. In fact it converted many of the apartments into office spaces and also rented them as shops. With this, the Trust engaged in an intense speculation in land. It acquired more land than required to widen thoroughfares, and sold these to the private builders to build apartments and also built business premises that it leased at very high rates. The private builders who followed on the heels of the Trust were not always big construction companies. Individuals desirous of building houses or independent stores also bought land from the Trust. As the Trust’s engineers paved, drained and metalled the road surfaces, they wiped away ancestral houses and replaced these with modern flats and shops.

II. The Improvement Trust Tribunal and Public Purpose

In 1912, the state had invested the CIT with the Land Acquisition Act of 1894. Under the provisions of the Act, the CIT could acquire all lands of the city for “public purpose”. The preamble of an Act in 1824 had first mandated that for reasons of public utility, property owners were bound to give up their lands to the EIC. The EIC applied this Regulation throughout the provinces of Bengal under the Presidency of Fort William. Public utility included some arguably legitimate
purposes such as “for carrying out any educational, housing, or health.” It also included other, more abstract purposes, such as “any other scheme of improvement.”

State acquisition of land for public purpose became even more intense in the wake of the railways in India. In 1850, with the state introducing railways, the EIC expanded the provisions of the Act of 1824 to facilitate uninterrupted land acquisitions. The amended Act created an expansive definition of “public purpose” based on the assumption that the state would be the chief architect of development, for which it needed to have the power to acquire land. In 1863, the state further expanded the clause of public purpose to benefit land acquisitions of private companies. The revised Act enabled the state to acquire land on behalf of private companies.

The revised Act also made it clear that it was no longer necessary for the state to initiate acquisition; local authorities, societies registered under the 1860 Societies Registration Act, and co-operative societies established under the Co-operative Societies Act could also acquire land for developmental activities through the state.

This was the backdrop in which the colonial state legislated the Act I of 1894, a watershed in establishing the absolute authority of the colonial state in matters of land acquisition. Public purpose authorized the heavy-handedness of the state in acquiring land, sometimes on behalf of private companies, at prices less than the market rates. In addition to the usual powers of the state in acquiring land, the Act also called for the state’s special provision in acquiring land during “urgency.” The Act mandated that if the government thought there was an immediacy to acquire
land for public purpose, it could issue a notice through the collector and acquire the land in fifteen days.

In 1911, the state empowered the CIT with the land acquisition Act of 1894. The Act provisioned for a special tribunal to replace the Court of law. This tribunal could deliberate on matters of acquisition and compensation on its own.74 A President and two assessors comprised the tribunal and arbitrated all disputes related to measurement and compensation of land.

The state appointed the President of the tribunal and one assessor, while the Calcutta Municipal Corporation appointed the second assessor. The President had the right to frame new rules under the Code of Civil Procedure 1908. In instances of disagreement on measurement of land, the opinion of the majority members of the tribunal prevailed. In matters of compensation, the President, however, could decide the amount. He could disregard the presence of the assessors if he thought that was necessary. In matters of law and procedure, his decision was the final verdict of the tribunal. The court of small causes then enforced all order of the tribunal as if it was their decree.

Working to free land from local customs, the tribunal justified its interventions in private property as “salus populi suprema lex”75, which meant that the interests of the public were paramount, and that private property and its customs were subordinate to such interests. In both the city and the suburb, its “planning” entailed acquiring plots of land for the public purpose of “preventing epidemics and improving health and sanitation”76. Describing plots of land as insanitary, the tribunal acquired these to “plan” them in hygienic ways. Planning was then an act of public utility that the Trust undertook on behalf of the state “for the moral and physical welfare of its people”77. It simply served notices to the residents informing
them that it needed their land for improvement. These notices required the residents to vacate their premises at once. The only difference was in the south suburbs, where the Trust required the consent of the state to serve these notices. In most cases, the state quickly approved the notices and the Trust got the plot of land that it wanted.

The Trust’s definitions of “publicness” stripped private property from all individual rights and customary meanings, making it alienable and readily available for public benefit. In 1915, it demolished more than two hundred Bengali houses and shops in Calcutta, and auctioned the entire land. In 1917, the collector who supervised land sale on behalf of the CIT acquired and auctioned land five times in a single year. In September of the same year, the collector auctioned nine plots in a single month.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scheme</th>
<th>Surplus Land</th>
<th>Rate Per cottah</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>1-10-12-42</td>
<td>3620</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII B</td>
<td>1-16-9-19</td>
<td>2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>1-14-8-21</td>
<td>1683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII A</td>
<td>1-16-9-20</td>
<td>19000</td>
</tr>
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<td>I</td>
<td>1-0-5-15</td>
<td>24,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>IB</td>
<td>0-6-0-0</td>
<td>26,200</td>
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Table 2: Surplus Land sold at the CIT auctions showing a phenomenal increase in land value per cottah. *Annual Report of the CIT, 1918-1924*

The famous auctioneers, Mackenzie and Lyall acquired and auctioned lands on behalf of the CIT. An advertisement in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* shows that they sold surplus lands acquired by the CIT at public auctions. On July 9, 1918, under the instruction of the Chairman of the Trust, they sold six plots of land on Russa Street north, and seven plots near Shambhu Nath Pandit Street in south Calcutta.
Receipts from the auctions reached a record high in 1919, adding forty-two lakhs of rupees to the war devastated colonial coffers.

_Benami_ or illegal transactions were common at these auctions. For _benami_ transactions, purchasers would often request the CIT to write conveyances in the name of some other individual. In such instances, it was evident that the purchasers had already sold the land before they actually got hold of the property from the Trust. These were the _benami_ transactions that the CIT did little to regulate.

To formalize new ownerships in land, the CIT employed agents to sell plots of land using private treaties. These treaties played a key role in shooting up land prices in Calcutta. In the summer of 1926, CIT employed Mr. Shrosbree and Babu Benoy Kumar Mukherjee as agents to sell surplus lands using private treaties. It assured them that it would grant them a commission on the total revenue that they generated from the sale of land. Following from this, they sold and leased lands at inflated rates.

Similarly in 1933, the CIT employed Talbot and Company, K.P. Chatterjee, and P.B. Chakravarty to sell surplus lands using private treaties. The Trust promised them commissions on the total sale of land. The agents then sold these plots of land for higher values, escalating overall land prices in Calcutta.

The auctions, however, did not always transfer land to new owners. On several occasions, the CIT reinstated existing owners, forcing them to buy back their lands at a higher rate. This practice was common in the Trust’s improvement schemes in the north Calcutta neighborhoods of Paik Para and Maniktola. Here the Trust grabbed plots of land from existing owners, and later parceled these and sold them back to the owners for higher values.
With the CIT auctioning land, land prices flared up in Calcutta. It reached an all time high in January 1920. That year, land prices increased three times along the central thoroughfares of Theatre Road and Camac Street.\(^{88}\) With high land values, housing conditions in Calcutta deteriorated even more; men and women checked into hotels finding these cheaper than the apartments.\(^{89}\) Colonial administrator Phelps now summoned a committee to inquire into the high land prices.\(^{90}\) This committee, in its report, held responsible the CIT’s speculations in land for the high land prices.\(^{91}\) The committee’s reports also made it clear that the CIT should invest more in the housing market to bring down land prices.

Despotic and random, the CIT’s land acquisitions resulted in numerous lawsuits. The tribunal now decided to resolve these disputes locally. Although the British had codified a system of law and established law courts, it followed a very different policy in matters related to land and property. To hear objections, the Trust held informal courts of hearing at neighborhood schools and houses of influential gentlemen.

In 1931, the CIT had demolished Bengali houses and bazaars to clear building sites in the Russa Road area of the south suburbs. As petitions poured in, the tribunal met at a school in Kalighat to hear grievances.\(^{92}\) Property owners from the neighborhoods of Russa Road, Mohin Halder Street, and Monhorpooker Road met here to voice their grievances against the Trust’s indiscriminate acquisition of property. The tribunal, however, refused to hear all grievances and dismissed the hearings mid-way.

In January 1918, High Court Justices engaged in elaborate discussions on whether the CIT was actually a law “Court”. A local gentleman, Nando Lal Ganguli, had brought a case against the President of the tribunal for not prosecuting a local
g gentle,man for perjury, which triggered debates whether the tribunal was a law court.\textsuperscript{93} Supporting Ganguli, the Justices directed the President to prosecute the guilty. But the President challenged the Justices, arguing that he did not have jurisdictional authority to prosecute the man who committed perjury. The President pointed out to section 195 of the Criminal Procedure Code, which clearly laid out that the tribunal was a not a court. The Justices explained that the word “court” meant a deliberative body of judges, magistrates and all persons legally authorized to take evidence. Following from such definitions, they argued, “we do not think that the tribunal can be regarded simply as a body of arbitrators, it was and is a court”.\textsuperscript{94}

With the High Court approving the tribunal as a Court of law, the CIT engaged in even more authoritarian acquisitions of land. In such efforts, the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 provided the widest possible meaning to the word “land”. The word “land” used in the Act, besides the ordinary legal meaning of the word, also included benefits that emerged from it, “profits from things attached to the earth or permanently fastened to anything so attached”. In this sense, the word “house” used in the Act meant not simply lands and buildings but also rents, commons, and profits from land. As the Trust commissioners pointed out, “land” also included anything that could be inherited, whether corporeal, such as land, or incorporeal such as future rights in land, or easement.

In all the cases that it deliberated, the tribunal rarely decided against the Trust. In 1916, the case of Chandra Kanta Ghosh, however, took Calcutta by storm.\textsuperscript{95} Ghosh owned premises on Chaulpati Road within the municipal limits of the city. Here he had cleared unwieldy forests and filled up a large water body to make land habitable. With the sanction of the Municipal Corporation he further
proceeded to build a two-storied building on the land. Meanwhile, the CIT served a notice asking him to evacuate the premise. It argued that the land was needed to meet the costs of improvement. An angry Ghosh then filed a lawsuit against the CIT describing its plans as ultra-vires.

The tribunal took the Trust by surprise when it decided in favor of Ghosh. It argued that the Trust could not acquire surplus land to meet the costs of improvement. The CIT took the dispute to the High Court. But the High Court once decided in favor of Ghosh. The High Court judges unanimously agreed that the CIT had acquired the premise for profit, and therefore the improvement plan was authoritarian, forceful and unsolicited.

Chandra Kanta Ghosh’s case, however, failed to inform subsequent lawsuits. In 1916 when the Trust acquired Mani Lall Singh’s land in Halliday Street, Singh argued that the Trust was not acquiring his land for improvement, but to meet the cost of other improvements. The tribunal decided the case in favor of the Trust, and Singh took the dispute to the High Court. At the High Court, the judges declared in favor of the Trust, arguing, “vesting of a local authority with powers to acquire land for the purpose of meeting costs of improvement could not be described as arbitrary”.

Mani Lall Singh’s case raised questions, including the accuracy of the Judge’s verdict in the case of Chandra Kanta Ghosh. Lawyers in Mani Lall Singh’s case refused to follow Ghosh’s case as a precedent. Instead, they followed the municipal laws of England. These authoritative laws provisioned for complete freedom of the commissioners in acquiring surplus lands to meet the costs of improvements. The Judges then argued that the decision in Chandra Kanta’s case
was a grave mistake, and that the Trust was free to acquire land to meet the costs of improvement.

Following the Court’s verdict on Mani Lall Singh’s case, the Judges in 1919 once again litigated the Chandra Kanta Ghosh’s case. 98 This time, the appeal to the Privy Council against the High Court was decided in favor of the Trust. This decision terminated the litigation that for long had impeded the CIT’s land acquisitions in Chaulpati Road.

Following from this, the CIT used its legal power to subdue defiant property owners. Property owners continued resisting its authoritative acquisitions and demolitions without any success. After the Chandra Kanta case, the tribunal decided all lawsuits in favor of the Trust:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Suits filed</th>
<th>Decisions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>Five suits were filed in small cause court, seven ejectment suits in small cause court</td>
<td>All decided in favor of the Trust, except one ejectment which remained pending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Twelve suits in Calcutta small causes court</td>
<td>All decided in favor of Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>Fourteen rent suits</td>
<td>All decided in favor of the Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>Twenty four suits in small causes court</td>
<td>All decided in favor of the Trust</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: The tribunal’s arbitrations favored the Trust repeatedly over the years. Annual Report of the C.I.T. (1920-1930)

As the tribunal decided lawsuits in favor of the CIT, property owners searched for new strategies to protect their holdings. They observed that although the Trust had powers to acquire all lands of the city, it steered clear of religious structures to avoid communal outbreaks. Property owners who received eviction notices now located religious investitures in their property, and argued that these were inalienable. In their everyday interactions with the CIT, they argued that their
properties, as religious holdings, had public value. They showed that temples inside their houses were meeting places that brought together the neighborhood residents as a religious community.

III. Debutter, Para, and a New Urban Community

In 1914, the CIT had planned to widen the Russa Road to clear street congestion. To broaden the street, it decided to shift the tramlines to a separate track on a tree planted strip. A row of ancestral houses of the Bengalis stood near the strip. A few months before it commenced work, the Trust served eviction notices to these houses. Asked to evict their houses within a few weeks, the homeowners drafted petitions to persuade the Trust to reconsider its plans.99 While some homeowners wrote that their houses belonged to their ancestors and therefore carried the long history of the family, others argued that they lacked finances to rebuild their houses. The Trust, however, refused to hear objections and simply carried on with its plans.

The lack of funds, however, delayed the Russa Road scheme. Four years later, when the Trust took up the scheme once again, the neighborhood dwellers came together to argue that their neighborhood was “a sacred place of salvation of the Hindus”100. They pointed to a temple of Lord Kali in one of the houses in the neighborhood, and argued that here, the Hindus performed their rituals to achieve salvation. They explained that demolition of the temple would not simply uproot the neighborhood, but an entire Hindu community. Faced with this argument, the CIT abandoned its plan in Russa Road.

The very different languages of the two petitions clearly show how the neighborhood dwellers employed the language of Hindu religion as their tactics to resist demolitions. Their identities as devout Hindus were reflexively produced and
represented their efforts to protect their property. As social actors who articulated this identity of a Hindu community, the property owners were themselves embedded in unequal sets of economic and political relations. Redefining themselves as Hindus, they inscribed land with both emotive and material meanings.

In 1917, the CIT served an evacuation notice to Haripodo Chowdhury in Watgunje Street. He replied that his house had a sacred temple of Panchanan, and that the Hindu dwellers of the neighborhood condemned this acquisition. The petition described the temple not simply as a family prayer hall, but as the “holiest temple of the country”. It argued that the sacrificial altar outside the temple was the oldest in the city. It went on to describe that on days of worship, devotees from across the country flooded the house; the roofed up courtyard provided them shelter. Following this petition, the Trust abandoned its scheme in Watgunje Street.

Inscribing land with religious meaning, the property owners transformed the land disputes into a struggle to protect their religion. Their efforts to protect the *debutter* was not simply a fight to protect property; these were efforts to stop the Trust from uprooting Hindu communities. In such efforts, the proof of “publicness” fell on the *para’s* dwellers. When they agreed that the property was indeed a public *debutter*, the Trust abandoned many of its schemes.

In the years that followed, the petitions of the homeowners increasingly described their properties as *debutter*. In 1919, served with eviction notices, the residents of a *para* in the Khidderpur area petitioned the chairman of the Trust as “Hindu inhabitants” trying to protect *debiters*. They pointed to a courtyard in the *para* that housed a temple of Kali. The temple fell in the path of the demolition. They argued that the temple was *debutter* and its demolition made little sense. Similar to the residents of Watgunje Street, they explained that the temple was one
of the oldest, and holiest places of worship in Calcutta. The demolition of the
temple, they warned, would upset all Hindus of the city. Following this petition, the
Trust called off its road-widening scheme in Khidderpur.

In the same year, the residents of Entally, a neighborhood in central Calcutta,
petitioned the Trust against street widening. They explained that demolition would
raze the temple of “dharma thakur”, a much-revered structure in the
neighborhood. They argued that the temple was debutter, which meant that it
belonged to the deity, and was inalienable.

Debutter property belonged to the deity (deb). Hindu customs did not require
a governing body of Trustees to dedicate property to the idol. The deity was the sole
owner of the property. Property owners could invest their lands in the deity by
offering these as utsarga or tribute. As such, written deeds did not exist for debutter
lands and transactions were not documented. The priest performed the rituals of
sankalpa, samarpan and pratistha to mark the official investiture of land in the
deity. Sankalpa meant the owners’ decision or intent to make this grant and
samarpan implied offering the land to the deity. Rituals performed during these
ceremonies included the recitation of mantras or hymns and dousing the idol in holy
water.

When faced with debutter properties, the CIT decided to abandon its
improvement scheme. It did not intervene in these holdings for fear of sectarian
revolts. All it could do in such situations was to try and prove that the debutter was
private: private debutters were alienable on the consent of the family. In 1876, the
British Indian Court had mandated in the Doorganath Roy versus Ram Chunder Sen
case that “Where the temple is a public temple, the dedication may be such that the
family itself could not put an end to it; but in the case of a family idol, the consensus
of the whole family might give the estate another direction”. This “another direction” meant the alienation and acquisition of the property by colonial land committees.

The land disputes that now took place between the Trust and property owners centered on the public/private nature of the deutters. In public deutters, the endowment of land was for the upkeep of temples for public worship. Often itinerant spiritual teachers, homeless men and women, orphans, poor widows and travelers took refuge in the temples premises. The temples offered food, bhog and prasad to all devotees. In contrast, the property set aside for the worship of the family deity, which did not benefit the public was the private deutter. Here, the temple remained open only to the members of the family. A sebayat worked as the estate manager, performing “sheba” or caretaking of the idol. The sebayat was simply an employee of the deity and could not use the estate for profit.

The boundaries between the public/private deutter, however, were far from well defined. On several occasions, the public/private overlapped, shaping “mixed deutters”. For example, the split between the private/public deutter was vague when a private temple opened its premises to the public on certain days of the year and remained closed on the others. On the days when the temple opened its premises, devotees poured in from neighboring houses, offering prayers, and performing rituals. As an act of charity, the temple also distributed bhog (food prepared for the deity) to the devotees on these days. The “publicness” of these family temples was therefore contingent on the discretion of the families who owned them.

Furthermore, a local custom permitted all heirs to worship the deity in palas or turns. The custom of palas made the personal and inalienable rights of worship
alienable. The famous *pujas* or worship, like the ones performed by the Halders of Kalighat, saw strangers buying rights to these *palas*. They met the cost of the prayers and in turn received the offerings and gifts for the day. It also depended on the buyer to decide whether he wanted to keep the temple open to the public on the day of the worship.

In 1916, a heated dispute took place between the Trust and the property owners over a temple at 25, Gopi Krishta Pal Lane. The Trust had earlier reported unseemly conditions of health and hygiene in this neighborhood. As part of its plans to sanitize the lane, it planned a wide street cutting through the “dark and insalubrious native settlements”\(^{109}\). A section of the road passed through the house of Mathur Mohan Sen. The Trust planned to demolish a *thakurbari* (temple), a flight of stairs, and a courtyard, all of which belonged to Mathur Mohan Sen.

The *thakurbari* was a two-storeyed temple that housed the idol of the deity Radhakanto. Babu Goyaram Sen, a merchant who lived in the same neighborhood had earlier commissioned the idol and placed it in his family temple.\(^{110}\) He engraved his name on the left foot of the deity and engaged in elaborate worships. Within a few years, his business failed, and he commanded the family priest to take the idol away. The priest gifted the idol to Babu Mathur Mohan Sen, another trader who lived in the neighborhood. Sen placed the idol inside an ornamented *thakurbari* in his house.

In June 1916, the CIT informed Sen that it planned to demolish his *thakurbari* for widening the adjoining street. The coparceners of *thakurbari* then met to decide its future. One group supported the Trust’s plans of demolition. They argued that it was old and repair costs were high.\(^{111}\) Babu Narayan Krishna Sen, led another group of coparceners to resist the demolition. They argued that the
thakurbari was the symbol of the family’s wealth and power, and that the Trust had no right to destroy it. Sen assured the coparceners that he would raise funds for repairs.\textsuperscript{112} Months passed, however, and he failed to raise the money. Finally, B.C. Sen, another coparcener reopened the debates and called for demolition.\textsuperscript{113}

The coparceners opposing the Trust’s schemes now argued that the thakurbari was public debutter and inalienable. Narayan Krishna Sen described that every sebayat during his pala allowed the neighborhood men and women to enter the temple premises, which meant that the temple served the public.\textsuperscript{114} The other coparceners challenged this view and explained that devotees from the para could not enter the thakurbari, unless the sebayats permitted them.\textsuperscript{115} For months, the dispute between the coparceners revolved around public/private nature of the temple, but failed to resolve it.

Finally, it fell on the para to decide whether the thakurbari was public or private. In August 1916, Babu Krishna Chandra Ghosh led the inhabitants of the para to argue that the thakurbari was private.\textsuperscript{116} They wrote to the Trust that the temple was not a temple at all; its premises did not carry lokkhons (indications): a trident, a tower, or a flag.\textsuperscript{117} They argued that the premise instead was a fulbaganbati (garden house). Mathur Sen had placed the deity in the fulbaganbati to make the place look like a “chapel in a gentleman’s park”.\textsuperscript{118}

The neighbors also pointed out that the premise was not a debutter as some sebayats had rooms for their guards. The guards cooked and stored grains for their horses. They therefore argued that the temple was neither a public temple, nor a debutter estate, but “built in a certain style and fashion without bearing characteristic indications and not consecrated in the manner enjoined in Shastras”.\textsuperscript{119}
In addition, they argued that Babu Goyaram Seth who first performed the pratistha (vivification) of the deity belonged to the Suvarna Banik caste. The neighbors showed that the people who did not belong to that caste refused to offer prayers for fear of excommunication. Mathur Sen had not performed a second pran pratistha (spiritual vivification) because the idol could not be vivified twice. The image of the deity was therefore merely “located” at the premises and not “vivified” with mantras as enjoined in the Shastras.

The neighbors argued that if the Trust did not destroy the thakurbari, it would destroy the Vedis or ‘spiritual seats’ in the nearby Baburam Ghose Lane. They explained that a rare and peculiar planetary configuration shaped the orientations of these Vedis. Seated on these immovable Vedis, the famous Pandit Panchanan had performed his spiritual sadhana (prayers) and attained siddha-hood (salvation). They argued that Hindus from all over the country and from “every kind of Hindu community” worshipped these Vedis. The petitioners then argued that as Hindus, they did want the Trust to destroy the Vedis.

Arguing against such views, coparcener B. N. Mullick brought together another group of para dwellers to reassert that the thakurbari was a public debutter. They argued that the Hindus and Vaishnava communities offered their prayers at the temple for over a hundred and fifty years. They wrote, “We the neighbors have the prescriptive right to perform these ceremonies”. For religious ceremonies like Annacoot, Janmastami, Dolejatra and performance of ceremonies like marriage and sradh (funeral), the temple was the only place available in the neighborhood. Every year in the mornings of the month of Kartik, the ladies of the neighborhood congregated at the temple to watch the mangal arati of the deity. The temple offered
the devotees shelter and *prasad* (food offered to the deity and then to the devotees) and was therefore open to the public.

Additionally, coparcener Bully Chunder Sen led the *para* in arguing that the temple was a public space where *pujas* took place privately. They appealed to the Trust to not demolish the *thakurbari*. The new road, they explained, would expose women and other devotees to the street, upsetting their prayers.

The debate over the publicness of the *debutter* property reached its climax when the *para* brought in Hindu *Pandits* (experts). Dr. Satish Chandra Vidyabhushan, Pandit Promotha Nath Tarkabhushan, and Pandit Parbaty Charan Tarkatirtha supported the group that argued that the idol in the *thakurbari* was moveable, but that the *Vedis* in the adjoining lane were not. Chandi Charan, a Sanskrit Pandit, who worked at the Sanskrit College, argued that the deity installed without the proper recital of mantras was movable. For relocating the idol, Chandi Charan argued that only a small *prayaschitta* (act of repentance) was enough.

At the heart of these debates was the assumption that the *para* was essentially a Hindu community. In the course of these debates, the *para* did not question its Hindu identity. Instead, both groups employed the language of Hindu religion to either support or resist the Trust’s demolition scheme. Investing space with religious meanings, these debates clearly show their tactics of managing space by crafting new identities. In such efforts, they did not seek the mediation of the nationalists. Instead, they negotiated community identities by claiming and resisting customs from within a set of Hindu spatial customs, which did little to further the nationalist spatial imaginations.

Hindu religious groups frequently joined the *para* in their demonstrations against the Trust. On February 25, 1925, while it was still dark, seven policemen
and fifty sweepers had demolished a small temple of the deity Jagadamba near the centrally located Stuart Hogg Market. Destroying the idol, they carried away the rubbles in a refuse cart to the Trust’s office. The next morning, the priest argued that the incident was unpardonable; the idol had stood there for nearly fifty years. The Hindu men of the neighborhood got together to protest against the land acquisition officer. Their protests reached a level of frenzy when Swami Viswananda along with his followers, the Mahavir Dal, arrived from the famous Kali temple at Tarakeshwar to support the para’s demonstrations against the CIT. The Dal fenced off the place where the temple stood with bamboos, and declared they would “protect their religion at all costs”.

Although Hindu religious groups assisted the paras in demonstrating against the Trust, bhadraloks (from Sanskrit bhadrā respectable, and lokā people) or English-educated Bengali men led their paras against the Trust. They were mostly schoolteachers, government officers, and clerks. They drafted petitions and convened to discuss new strategies to resist the senseless acquisitions of the Trust. Many of them shared with the nationalists anti-colonial sentiments; but in their paras, their efforts remained reflexive, contributing little to the grand project of nationalism. Far from envisioning a homogenous community of the nation, the bhadraloks in their para marshaled Hindu identities to protect their properties from the trust.

As early as the late nineteenth century, the ratepayers of Calcutta had protested against the oppressive ways of the Building Commission. Paying taxes for town improvements, they had demanded more voice in shaping their city. In the early twentieth century, the bhadraloks argued in similar ways, but confined their protests to the spaces of their para or neighborhood; the para emerged as the spatial
unit of their movement against the Trust. They met at the neighborhood clubs and in the houses of their neighbors to critique the Trust’s policies and also draft strong petitions. They argued that the Trust was “thrusting on the people” its improvement plans without first considering the widely different spatial practices of the Bengalis. They argued that the home for the Bengalis meant a *bastubhita*: a symbol of rich ancestry, a source of monthly income, and a repository of Hindu identities. The Trust in razing these houses was not simply destroying structures, but also wiping out identities that these structures enclosed.

**IV. Conclusion**

In the early twentieth century, a new urban framework – streets, apartments, and suburbs – transformed Calcutta into a dynamic intersection of circulatory processes based on colonial exigencies. Planning became the colonial tool to carve a revolution free city. Armed with the goal of clearing congestion, it was instrumental in clearing Indian settlements from the neighborhoods of the colonial seats of power. Planning then colonized the organic growth of the city, displacing Indians to a muddle of suburban sprawl, tenements, and apartments that stratified the city along its racial and economic components. This separation of space set in motion an increasing dichotomy in the urban experiences of the rich and the poor. Apartments entailed a vertical separation of urban groups alongside the horizontal.

With colonial efforts to acquire more land, private property emerged as the locus of disputes between the city dwellers and the improvement committees. At the focal point of these debates were religious metaphors that became transposed in urban space. This, in turn, added to private property a public value weaving together neighborhoods as Hindu communities. The new identity of the *para* as a Hindu community was then an outcome of the complex contestations over property, and
the struggle to control religion and identity. At the heart of these struggles were sets of social relations constituted through meanings invested in space; these new social relations led to the carving of new identities, including the sharpening of a Hindu identity in the backdrop of widening social and economic polarities in the city. As the next chapter will argue, in the next few years, the Hindu identity congealed within the space of the para and entailed a change in the relationships between the body and the built environment.
However, that history is not within the scope of this dissertation. I am more interested in understanding how city dwellers employed the state interventions in their daily lives. 

By this time the Mahrata Ditch was filled and transformed into the Circular Road. But “Calcutta” meant different geographic spaces under different jurisdictions: under the jurisdiction of the High Court the boundary was the Circular Road; under the Corporation the town with the added area; greater Calcutta again meant the Corporation and suburbs of Cossiope-Chitpur, Mancitola, Tolygunje, Garden Reach and Howrah on the other side of the river. However, as C.H.Bompas wrote in a letter dated, January 25, 1912, “Calcutta” for improvement purposes meant the part of the city to the north, or north of Park Street.

A similar history can be traced in the spaces of Muslim paras of Calcutta. There the waqf replaced the debutter, and neighborhoods crafted their identities centering these properties. However, that history is not within the scope of this dissertation. I am more interested in understanding how city dwellers employed a Hindu identity as their everyday tactic to resist the state interventions in their para. Debutter is then the focus of my study, and not the waqf.

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As Prashant Kidambi has shown that the very legal and administrative mechanisms that it had designed to facilitate its improvement work in Bombay, ended up restricting it. Prashant Kidambi, *The making of an Indian metropolis: colonial governance and public culture in Bombay, 1890-1920* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007), 93.

Cicero’s *De Legibus* mentions this as the principle to argue that the safety of the people should drive law.

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“Petition of the Hindu residents of the Russa Road with regards to the great deity Kali temple to the Chairman of the Trust”, Proceedings of the CIT, February 1918.

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John Archer had earlier shown in an excellent article how the para responded to colonial improvements by selectively appropriating these. However, the idea of appropriation in this article is sporadic and not geared towards forming communities. See Johna Archer, "Paras, Palaces, Pathogens: frameworks for the growth of Calcutta, 1800-1850". City & Society. 12 (2000): 45.

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Chapter III

The Hindu City: 
Paras and a New Urban Community

Every year, in October, Bengalis celebrate Durga Puja in Calcutta. The Puja is a
weeklong festival when daily life comes to a standstill as fairs and musical programs take
hold of the city. As the festive week begins, the Bengalis decorate their houses and
neighborhoods in extraordinary ways. They erect theme-based pandals, or festooned
spaces to welcome the warrior goddess Durga. Carrying weapons in her ten arms, the idol
of Durga rides on a lion. The Puja commemorates her slaying of the mythical demon
Mahishasura.

One of the oldest festivals of the city, Durga Puja, however, underwent significant
transitions in the early twentieth century. Until that time, wealthy Indian merchants, the
banias, worshipped Durga in temples inside their house. The Puja was then a household
affair open to the family, friends, and neighbors of the bania.¹ In the early twentieth
century, groups of English-educated, urban professional men, the bhadraloks, brought the
deity out from the bania houses and worshipped her in the streets and parks of their
neighborhood or para. This chapter will argue that these shifts in the celebrations of
Durga Puja dovetailed a bigger transition in the socio-spatial configuration of the
neighborhood, or the para.

Paras first took shape in Calcutta² in the wake of the EIC cotton trade in the
region. In the late eighteenth century, when the EIC reached Sutanuti, many Bengali men
followed them there. They worked as banias, or agents of the Company. Working with
the Company, they amassed great wealth and built mansions. While building these
mansions, they cleared the surroundings and distributed plots of land to their families and friends. They distributed these lands according to the caste (profession) of the settlers. Envisioning neighborhoods as self-sufficient republics, they also distributed land to the service classes to settle nearby. Thus took shape the early caste-based paras of Calcutta.

Many banias had moved to Calcutta from the countryside of Bengal. In ordering the space of the para, they modeled it after their villages. In fact, in Sanskrit, the word para means “part of a village”. Similar to villages, paras under bania patronage were more than geographic spaces; these were spatial communities with kin like ties, where non-related residents lived like families. Resisting the city making efforts of the EIC, the banias built streets, huts, hospitals, and schools in their para. They imagined their para as autonomous spatial communities with every aspect of self-rule. Similar to village headmen, they had their own courts and police. Configured in this way, the para preserved the social space of the village in the city.

The spatial configuration of the para transformed after 1835. That year, the state introduced a new system of education with English as the medium of instruction. This education shaped a new group of urban professional men. Known as the bhadraloks, their knowledge of the English language became the hallmark of their status.3 Their education offered them new opportunities in professional, administrative, and clerical employments in the city. Many bhadraloks also worked as teachers in schools and colleges, maintaining and developing the new education system. Armed with their new education, the bhadraloks called for democratic transitions in their para and challenged the authority of the bania.
In the late nineteenth century, high import duties coupled with oppressive revenue polices impoverished the *banias*. This decline further assisted the emergence of the *bhadraloks* as leaders of their *para*. The route to upward mobility in the city now became different: an English education, a University degree, and a white-collar job promised a decent life in the city. Many *banias* left their work as commercial agents, received instruction in English, and started new lives as *bhadraloks*.

Interestingly, the figure of the *bhadralok* is at the heart of several debates on colonial Calcutta. Scholars have described *bhadraloks* in broad terms, but have failed to arrive at a consensus on who the *bhadralok* actually was. In their descriptions, *bhadraloks* include upper caste Hindu men with landed property as well as middling groups of urban professional men educated in English. This chapter reconstructs the metropolis of the second group. By *bhadraloks*, I mean the urban professional classes, mostly upper castes, who led active associational lives in the *para* and through it, shared similar cultural practices.

This chapter will argue that in the late nineteenth century, the urban management of the *para* functioned as a central category in crafting the *bhadralok* identity. The everyday spaces of the *para* authorized a social rule of the *bhadraloks* that attached new meanings to their identity. In other words, the reconfiguration of the urban landscape went hand in hand with the reorganization of social order. Questions of urban space—its arrangement, cleanliness, safety, and maintenance—served as the backbone of the *bhadralok* authority in the *para*. Their supervision of the *para* displayed their difference from the superabundance of the *banias*, and also challenged colonial assertions of Bengali backwardness.
As I will argue, bhadralok government in the para challenged state authority by reconfiguring power relations at the local level of the everyday, rather than at an institutional level. In other words, bhadralok government in the para was not a politically motivated resistance to sovereignty. Instead, they carved different ways of inhabiting the city to reject rules set by the state. For instance, at the heart of bhadralok government in the para, were concerns of public health and hygiene. This intensified in the late nineteenth century, in the backdrop of cholera and plague. At this time, the bhadraloks shared with the state the fear of epidemics. But they reinvented a new code of Hindu spatial hygiene and enforced it on their para to oppose the epidemic prevention policies of the state.

More importantly, the bhadraloks in this study are the urban professional men who resisted nationalist spatial imaginations in asserting their hold over the para. Although the nationalists came from the rank of the bhadraloks, not all bhadraloks engaged with the nationalist thought. The schoolteachers, government officers, and clerks in my study are those bhadraloks who were the leaders of their para, and in exercising their role as advocates of hygiene resisted nationalist interventions. As I will argue, this resistance became even more intense when the Swarajists, a group of nationalists who upheld self-government, became municipal authorities. At that time, disregarding the Swarajist authority, the bhadraloks constituted their own health associations, clubs, and scout camps to school the para in hygiene. In such efforts the bhadralok goal was to mark their triumphant rise as urban sanitarians.

I will argue that in the bhadralok government in hygiene, ideas of development manifested as interventions in conduct. They deployed the new codes of hygiene to target
both spaces and bodies in their *para*. This facilitated a gradual modal shift from the control of spaces to the control of bodies. Following from this, the *bhadraloks* initiated a pedagogic training program in their *para* to train their fellow *para* dwellers in cleanliness and conduct fit for the city. The clubs, health associations, and parks of the *para* imparted this training, disciplining the speech, sexuality, and deportment of men and women. The regulation of the body, its gradual incorporation within a web of rules, mechanisms, structures, and behavioral codes was then not only an outcome of an increasingly urbanized modernity but also reflected a strategic intervention of the *bhadralok* into every aspect of everyday life.

Starting in 1912, the improvement initiatives of the CIT led to frequent acquisitions of private property, and demolition of ancestral houses. As I have argued in the previous chapter, faced with these demolitions, the property owners invested their property with religious meanings. Supporting these claims, the *para* came together as a Hindu community. At this time, the *bhadralok* code of Hindu spatial hygiene contributed to the Hindu identity of the *para*. As I will argue, in authoring the norms of Hindu spatial hygiene, the *bhadraloks* did not seek the mediation of the nationalists. Instead, their efforts remained widely different from nationalist spatial imaginations.

At the same time, the close association of cleanliness with schooling extended the *bhadralok* authority to aspects of personal, alongside public life. This empowered their social rule in the *para*: advising the *para* dwellers on hygiene, they also advised them on matters relating to property, marriage, and conduct. To avoid the sovereignty of the state, they formed neighborhood clubs that worked as sieves of their social rule. Rejecting the authority of the state, they employed a code of unwritten laws to govern the *para*. At the
heart of these unwritten laws were ideas of fairness and norms of behavior that the bhadraloks approved. A simple dismissal of the state’s claim to define subjects and activities, therefore, characterized the bhadralok government in the para.

This chapter makes significant contribution in offering a local, everyday view of colonial urbanism. First, enquiring into the everyday spaces of the para, it shows the constitution of autonomous spatial communities with every aspect of self-rule that took shape well before India achieved formal independence. Second, going beyond social history approaches that study structures and ideas, this chapter describes urbanization as a bodily process. Exploring the para, I show that the body became a focal point for a plethora of different concerns ranging from the need to produce modern city dwellers to anxieties over the control of deviant behavior.

I. Banias, and the Early History of the Para

In order to understand bhadralok attitudes toward urban space in the early twentieth century, we must first turn our attention to the early nineteenth century. During this time, urban space served as a backdrop for the growing power of the banias. They designed the para to imprint their hold on the city and shape a landscape that extended their authority.

In the early nineteenth century, the banias were samaj sashaks or “rulers of the community”. Usually the word samaj\(^7\) means a community of men and women, but also implies a society governed by customs. In that sense, the samaj advances notions of fairness and justice based on social acceptance. These ideas are usually different from the laws and justice advanced at the law courts. In the para, the banias authored new customs, laying out a code of socially acceptable behavior. These customs attended to
matters of everyday life, such as marriage, property, and religion. As the banias employed these customs to govern the para, these grew as autonomous republics under their supervision.

The social configuration of the para facilitated the samaj shashan of the bania. Right at the heart of the para stood their mansions. Various known as zamindarbari, bonedibari or rajbari, its ornate facades and imposing structures were visible symbols of the wealth of the bania. Administrative and social life of the para revolved around these mansions. Here, the banias held offices and kaccheris (caste-courts). An inner central courtyard housed the thakurdalan, or a podium where they placed their family deity. The courtyard fronting the deity was infact the place where the social life of the para took shape. Here, the banias organized festivals, social ceremonies, marriages, plays, and music performances. On the days of these festivals, the doors of their mansion remained open to the para. Men and women congregated at the mansion to offer their prayers and take pleasure in the cultural performances: these exchanges reinforced their kin-like ties.

Working for the EIC, the banias were also urban zamindars. They invested substantial part of their income in land.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Name</th>
<th>Rental Income (Rupees)</th>
<th>Premise Residential (Rupees)</th>
<th>Premise Non Residential (Rupees)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ramakrishna Deb</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gopi Mohan Deb</td>
<td>559</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nemai Charan Mullick</td>
<td>971</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gopi Mohan Tagore</td>
<td>604</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moti Lal Seal</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaynaran Ghoshal</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwarkanath Tagore</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akroor Dutt</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Banias as urban landlords, (Source: S.N.Mukherjee, Calcutta: Myths and History, 1977)
The *banias* work with the EIC provided them with enough wealth to clear plots of land and rent these. Investing in land, they also received considerable returns from rents.\(^8\)

As urban *zamindars*, the *banias* ordered the land that they leased. In ordering these lands, they preserved the spatial patterns of the villages. In Bengal, villages were settlements clustered around a central point, which in most cases was the house of the *zamindars* (tax collector and later proprietor). Known as *paras*, *tolas*, and *tulis*, kinship ties structured social relations in the neighborhoods and neighbors lived like members of the same family. At the same time, these neighborhoods were caste-networks; men and women belonging to the same caste lived in the same neighborhood.

Similar to the spatial practices of the villages, the *banias* preserved the caste of city dwellers in distributing plots of land. Caste therefore molded the contours of the *paras* in the city. In early Calcutta, *paras* were in fact named after the caste of their residents. When the Kulin castes settled in a *para*, it was known as *kulinpara*. Similarly, the Brahmins lived in the *bamunpara*.\(^9\) To make the *para* self-reliant, the *banias* distributed land to the service classes to settle near by. When they offered land to the physicians (*baidya*) near their mansions, the *baidya para* took shape. The family priests lived in the *bhattacharya para*. In a similar way, *muchipara* (cobblers), *majhipara* (fishermen), *kumorpara* (sculptors), and *duleypara* (palanquin bearers) formed a web around the *bania* mansion.\(^10\)

In the early nineteenth century, the EIC as zamindars of Sutanuti, Kalikata, and Gobindpur, had commissioned the Lottery Committee to construct new roads. The efforts of this committee, however, did little to improve the Indian neighborhoods. Instead, the *banias* patronized the early growth of these neighborhoods configuring it in ways that
conjured up images of the village. For instance, a water tank stood at the heart of the 
para, a temple beside it, and green fields offered the boys a meeting place for evening 
games. The streets of the para presented a mix of people, animals, and carriages that saw 
the spilling of the domestic into the space outside.

Figure 1: The para surrounding Govindram Mitter’s house, showing mud huts and animals. Source: 
Thomas Prinsep (1800-1830) dated c.1829. Inscribed on the album page: 'Calcutta, Noubruttun-Chitpoor 
Bazaar'.

As urban zamindars, the banias engaged in philanthropy and built streets, 
hospitals, temples, and educational institutes for the Indians. For instance, the eldest son 
of Sukomoy Dutta, also a bania, financed the building of Dum Dum Road.11 Raja Baidya 
Nath Raj Bahadur financed the road leading to Dum Dum Road.12 In addition, he 
contributed thirty thousand rupees for building the Native Hospital, twenty thousand 
rupees to improve female education, and also commissioned the Karmanasha Bridge.

In a similar way, Rajinder Dutt, member of the illustrious Dutt family, founded 
the Hindu Metropolitan College.13 In May 1853, the college held its first class at the 
palatial house of Ramgopal Mullick at Sinduriputti, Bagh Bazaar. Motilal Seal, another 
bania, had earlier established the Seal’s Free College, which now merged with the Hindu 
Metropolitan College. Dutt also opened a preparatory unit of the College at Shobha 
Bazaar in north Calcutta with the stipulation that on completion of the preliminary course
in this branch unit, successful students could join the Hindu Metropolitan College for free. In addition, he built charitable dispensaries and chhatras or places that served free food to the destitute.\textsuperscript{14}

The \textit{banias} argued that their role as leaders of the \textit{para} was divinely ordained. Temples therefore served as repositories of their regal values. They erected magnificent temples where they performed daily rituals and periodic festivals. These rituals celebrated the divine roots of their authority. In 1803, Shankar Ghosh, a wealthy \textit{bania} erected a magnificent temple of the goddess Kali at his mansion. In the eastern wing of the temple, he engraved a tablet that read “Kali dwells in the heart of Shankar”, alluding to both his name, as well as Lord Shiva to whom Kali was betrothed.\textsuperscript{15} Here he performed elaborate worships of Kali, instilling in the minds of the \textit{para}'s men and women that his power was divinely sanctioned.

A little away from this temple, Gokul Mitra, considered the richest Bengali of the time, built an architecturally magnificent temple for the deity Madanmohan. On full moon nights, Mitra invited the leading Brahmins of the city to lead the prayers.\textsuperscript{16} At these prayers, he expressed his gratitude to the deity for making him the leader of the \textit{para}.

As a self-governing community, the \textit{para} had its own court and systems of law. The \textit{banias} resisted British law courts, arguing that these did not take into account the caste and religion of the petitioners. A wealthy trader, Motilal Seal, for instance, wrote that the prejudices of the British courts had forced him to maintain his own court and army.\textsuperscript{17} He described that on several occasions he had informed the EIC that the courts should take into account the caste of the Indians, but the Company had refused to make such provisions. As the EIC remained indifferent to the caste practices of the appellant, Seal
fell back on resolving disputes locally.

Like Seal, banias across the city maintained their own courts and private armies. These courts met at their mansions, and were known as the *jatimala kaccheris* or the caste-courts. Their private armies, on the other hand, comprised clubs men or *lathials*, who wielded the *lathi* or the club to settle property disputes and discipline rent defaulters. Occasionally, the banias employed this army to subdue other banias of the city, and acquire their properties.

Along with the caste-courts, festivals, such as the Durga Puja, recast the role of the banias as *samaj sashaks*. The generous display of wealth at these festivals played a key role in authorizing them as leaders of the *para*. In 1757, Nabakrishna Deb, a *munshi* (clerk) with the EIC, celebrated Durga Puja for the first time in Calcutta. The Puja at his mansion included musical performances, elaborate rituals, gift giving, and a grand feast. Deb offered several hundred pounds of rice to goddess Durga as tribute.¹⁸

Following the Puja at the Deb mansion, banias across the city vied each other in the most elaborate celebrations of Durga Puja. The Dutt family, for instance, scrubbed their palace floors with rose water on the days of the Puja.¹⁹ In 1862, Kaliprashanna Sinha, a playwright, described Durga Puja at the bania mansion:

The bania ensconced himself regally on a cushion in the corridor with his hangers-on after the aarti (evening ceremony of lights) he was tricked out in a fine silk dhoti. The liveried darwans (guards) drew their swords and stood guard over him. Hurcarras, hookah-bearers, and lackeys stood in front of him with folded hands to do his bidding. The bania was surrounded by an array of gem-studded hookahs; he took a drag on them randomly like a stray dog nibbling at leftovers, and looked sidelong at the crowd to see which hookah was being admired! The display was principally aimed at impressing upon the people the quantities of valuable objects in the bania’s house. Had there been more space on the floor, the bania would have displayed some more hookahs.²⁰
The figure of the *bania* is central to Sinha’s description of the Durga Puja. The Puja appears almost like a display of *bania* wealth than a celebration of Durga’s victory over Asura. The *bania* authority stemmed from this wealth. It was closely tied to the social prestige that he enjoyed in the *para*. Enthralled by the great wealth on display at the *bania* mansion, the *para* dwellers felt certain that the *banias* could take care of the *para* and also protect them.

The celebrations of Durga Puja at the *bania* house were in fact incomplete without the performances of the courtesans. In 1832, Harinath Ray, a *zamindar*, was caught up in work in Calcutta. He failed to reach his village in time for the Puja. He therefore arranged for a Durga Puja in the city. On the final day of the Puja, he organized a *bai nachch* aboard the river Ganges. He wrote back home that those who thought such performances were obscene should get used to it, for it was a practice widespread in the city.

![Figure 2: Durga Puja at the bania house. A painting by Alexis Soltykoff (1859)](image)

This painting shows panoply of performances on the occasion of the Durga Puja at a *bania* house. Women dancers can be seen at the center, surrounded by musicians and performers. Men appear to be playing drums and other stringed instruments. The
performers are dressed as characters of plays. The idol of Durga forms the backdrop, bordered by impressive chandeliers and expensive drapery. The painting shows the British attending the Puja. They stand with the bania family and watch the performances. What is striking in the painting is that everyone stands in close proximity, and there is no separation between the British and the Indians, the bania and the performers, or the men and women.

Other than the bai nachch, Kabigans or extreme competitions of song lyrics, shongs or pantomimes, and jatras or slapstick comic theaters were popular at the Puja. Many of these performances ridiculed the extravagant lifestyles of the bania. They, however, encouraged these performances as the masses found them entertaining. The performances remained highly selective; several groups competed with each other for a chance to perform at the mansion. Devendranath Tagore, a philosopher and religious reformer, writes that his family used to invite exotic dancers from across the country to perform during the Puja. They also offered gifts to a thousand Brahmins, and presented the guests with gold couches to sit and watch the performances.22

Almost a hundred years later, Durga Puja celebrations in Calcutta transformed in significant ways. Earlier celebrated at the bania mansions, Pujas now took place in the city’s streets and parks. Banias did not oversee these Pujas. Instead, neighborhood clubs arranged for the Puja, and the para paid chandas or subscriptions to meet the expenses. Unlike banias, the clubs condemned artistic exchanges between the Indian and the British; they also described the performances of Muslim courtesans as obscene. In its place, they encouraged devotional music and demonstrations of physical fitness (wrestling matches and gymnastics).
As I will argue, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the rise of a new group of middle class, English educated *bhadraloks* reconfigured the space of the *para*. Different from the western bourgeoisie, the *bhadraloks* imbricated caste with class: men from the upper castes, received instruction in English, and became the middle class. Working as teachers, lawyers, doctors, and clerks, they were the *bhadraloks* (genteel) marked for their refined speech and behavior. English education, it is important to note, was the vehicle that remade their mental world. Armed with this education, they challenged the wealth-based authority of the *bania*. At the same time, they subjected the urban landscape to a new scrutiny with an eye to making it more commodious, hygienic, and edifying for the general population. This, in turn, crafted their identities as urban sanitarians.

**II. *Bhadraloks* and a New Spatial Order**

In the late nineteenth century, the *bhadraloks*\(^{23}\) offered a critique of the *bania* as corrupt and profligate. They described the *bania* lifestyle as extravagant and their Durga Pujas as obscene. Challenging the *bania* authority, they called for democratic transitions and a more egalitarian space of the *para*. The *banias*, already an impoverished group, could hardly survive these challenges. A colonial system of deindustrialization, a feudalized agrarian system, and discriminatory state support speeded up their decline.

By the early twentieth century, clubs replaced *bania* mansions as the nucleus of *bhadralok* *paras*. Each *para* had its own club housed in a spare room in the neighborhood. All clubs had an indoor games section, a room to play music, and a library attached to it. *Bhadraloks*, who lived in the neighborhood, met at these clubs to spend enjoyable evenings in *addas*\(^{24}\) (informal conversations) on literature, music, and politics.
Addas reinforced the kin like ties of the para. As members of an extended family, the bhadraloks initiated programs for the moral and physical uplift of their para. These programs entailed a new vision of space that marked the bhadralok government as different from that of the banias. At the very outset, the bhadraloks expressed their commitments to cleanliness and hygiene. They shaped new campaigns to sanitize the space of their para and improve the health of the residents. This shaped a new basis of their power in the para, different from the earlier wealth-based authority of the bania. Additionally, the bhadraloks drew on Hindu religious texts to put together a new code of hygiene as their tactics to resist state interventions. These new notions of spatial hygiene reveal the way in which the bhadraloks used space to craft a distinctive, and authoritative urban identity.

Para Health Associations

On a Sunday morning in March 1930, a procession of bhadraloks started from Sukea Street in north Calcutta. They toured their para, playing musical instruments, and singing songs that celebrated strong bodies and good health. For two hours the procession walked the streets in the scorching sun, singing, and playing the drums. Leading the procession were men who carried flags of a health club. At noon, the procession stopped at a public library. Kailash Chandra Bose, the President of Sukea Street health association delivered a lecture on the benefits of healthy and clean bodies.

The procession marked the first anniversary of the Sukea Street health association, one of the many para health associations that took shape in the wake of the plague epidemic in Calcutta. As alternatives to the state health associations, these worked at the level of the para and recruited workers from among the para.
The health associations met at the local club or in an empty room in the neighborhood. In Christopher Street, Pashupati Ghosh, a schoolteacher rented out a room in his house to the health association. The *bhadraloks* met here every week to discuss new ways to improve the health of the *para*. They studied Hindu religious texts to retrieve new codes of hygiene. Following from this, the volunteers went door to door to educate men and women of the *para* in the new codes of hygiene.

![Bhadraloks at the meeting of para health association. The Calcutta Municipal Gazette, March 1926](image)

Each association had a medical officer, locally enrolled health workers and *sevaks* (volunteers). The *sevaks* surveyed the *para*, enquired after the sanitation of the houses, and reported incidences of disease. They explained to the people the benefits of good health, helped indigent patients to adopt sanitary precautions, and moved ailing patients to the hospitals. Each health association also had a dispensary where the medical officer treated the unwell.

These health associations challenged the colonial argument that the Bengalis lacked awareness of hygiene. Instead, the associations showed that the Bengalis valued hygiene and took initiative to sanitize streets and houses. Deliberations at these associations, however, also showed that a Hindu science of hygiene, different from what the state advocated, governed the Bengali neighborhoods.
Hindu notions of hygiene first took shape in the context of the “dustbin dispute” in the *paras*. In the early twentieth century, the Calcutta Municipal Corporation had assigned a dustbin for each street, where refuse piled during the day, and carts took these away the next morning. The Corporation placed these dustbins at the doorsteps of Bengali houses. All through the night garbage piled in these bins, and in the morning the bins discharged an unbearable stink.\(^{30}\) To make matters worse, the carts did not collect the garbage on a regular basis. On days when the cart did not arrive, the reeking bins made it difficult for the homeowners to live in their houses.

When the Bengali homeowners drafted petitions asking the Corporation to remove the bins, they responded by shifting the bin from one doorstep to the other. The *para* dwellers now approached the health association to solve the dustbin problem. The association sent its representatives, the *bhadraloks*, to survey the bins. These men later met at the health association and argued that the location of the bins did not simply emit a terrible odor, but also threatened the caste of the homeowners. They argued that Hindu customs mandated that bins be placed at least three feet away from upper caste houses.\(^{31}\)

The health association then employed the young boys of the *para* to remove these bins from the doorsteps of houses. They did not inform the Municipal Corporation, nor ask for its permission in relocating the bins. Instead, they argued that they had the right to challenge municipal authority when it threatened their religion, or caste practices. The young boys of the *para* under the directives of the *bhadraloks* simply lifted the bins and placed it on the roadside, away from the houses. The health association also promised to help the homeowners, if the Corporation placed these bins backs on their doorstep.
It is interesting to note here that the Swarajists headed the Municipal Corporation at the time. In 1924, they had won the municipal elections, and formed their own government. But this change in government from the British to the Swarajists did little to improve the conditions of the para. That the petitions of the bhadraloks failed, and the Swarajists at the Corporation refused to hear their grievances marks a point of departure, and the distance between the bhadraloks and the Swarajist municipal councilors only grew with time.

Employing the language of Hindu religion to solve the dustbin problem, the bhadraloks slowly emerged as advocates of Hindu spatial hygiene. They engaged in cleaning streets, supervising the cleanliness of the houses of the para, and made certain the hygienic disposal of filth. In all these efforts, they explained that their work followed the norms of Hindu spatial hygiene. Upholding Hindu hygiene, they also organized “health shows” in their paras. At these shows charts and exhibits displayed the standards of Hindu nutrition and bodily fitness. The bhadraloks also performed songs, plays, and magic shows to instruct the para dwellers in new codes of Hindu hygiene.32

These new principles of hygiene marked the bhadralok government in the para as different from the banias, and also the state. As doctor Harinath Ghosh, explained at the anniversary celebrations of Sukea Street health association, Bengali customs of hygiene

Figure 4: Para bhadraloks settling the dustbin question. The Calcutta Municipal Gazette, March 1926
were very different from that of the British. He delivered a lecture on “religion and health” that described Hindu customs of hygiene as fit for the Bengalis. In a similar way, Atindra Basu who lived in Simla neighborhood of north Calcutta screened several films on hygiene at the health shows. Among these films was “Messenger of God” that celebrated the power of Hindu hygiene.33

In 1924, health associations across the city carried out an anti-spitting campaign. Bhadraloks wrote pamphlets on the dangers of spitting on the streets and distributed these in their para. Addressing the men and women of the para as pious Hindus, the pamphlets advised them to observe self-control by not spitting on the streets. More importantly, the pamphlets laid out clear guidelines of behavior appropriate for the city. This included new rules for conduct, dress, speech, and sexuality fit for the streets. These pamphlets were then the earliest of the bhadralok efforts that manifested as interventions in conduct. At the heart of the new code of behavior that the pamphlets endorsed was the idea that the para dwellers were essentially Hindu city dwellers and that their Hindu identity should inform their behavior in the streets.

With the anti spitting campaign, Hindu morality, spatial hygiene, and proper conduct merged to form a nexus that shaped the bhadra identity. Hygiene and cleanliness were in fact instrumental in crafting the seamless, modern, and civilized identities of the bhadraloks. They described themselves as the epitome of moral and physical health. Cleanliness extended beyond the spaces of their house, to inform their speech, deportment, and behavior, all of which contributed to shape the bhadrá or refined character of the bhadraloks. At the same time, bhadralok commitments to the language of Hindu hygiene
marked their efforts in the *para* as different from the state efforts to improve the health of the city.

Following on the heels of the anti-spitting campaign, *bhadraloks*, initiated an anti-cholera campaign. In 1925, cholera broke out in Calcutta and claimed numerous lives. Concerned with the growing numbers of casualties, *bhadraloks* organized awareness-raising campaigns that promoted Hindu laws of hygiene. They met at their clubs to revise the scriptures and invented new standards of physical fitness, nutrition, and cleanliness.

In April 1926, the club *Svasthyo Bikash Samiti* (Health Promotion Society) in Bhowanipur, organized lantern lectures that argued Hindu hygiene as more effective in preventing cholera than the state initiatives. After the lectures, Haridev Nag, a schoolteacher who lived in the neighborhood led the *para* in reciting scriptures and singing devotional songs that celebrated Hindu hygiene. He toured the *para* singing songs on the strength of Hindu bodies and clean habits. Along with the other volunteers, he spent hours, expostulating, arguing, and persuading the *para* to follow Hindu diets and partake in Hindu fitness programs.

The schoolteachers who lived in the *para* played a key role in the health campaigns. Armed with the English-education and directly engaged in its circulation, they were bearers of “civilization”. For that reason, they lead the *para* in expressing its disgust for filth and disease; they argued, similar to the British, that filth symbolized “backward” and “uncivilized” people. Their disgust with filth then contrasted their clean bodies and commitments to modernity. With health associations and sanitation campaigns, *paras* under *bhadralok* supervision, embodied their modernity.
Starting in the late nineteenth century, the state promoted particular visions of masculinity that described the *bhadralok* as effeminate. Tropes of the effeminate man added to the existing discourses on savage Bengalis. These new ideals naturalized systems of gendered and race based oppression. The colonial cliché of the "effeminate Bengali" shaped an entire ensemble of political, economic, and administrative imperatives that underpinned the strategies of colonial rule in the late nineteenth century.  

Colonial perceptions of effeminate Indian men worked to mobilize new norms of bodily fitness in the *bhadralok* discourses. They described strong and fit bodies as a thing of pride and honor for the Hindus. In such arguments, they showed that the scriptures provided details of physical trainings that could sculpt strong bodies. To this end, they initiated scout-training programs in their *paras* to train the youth in bodily fitness. They transformed their neighborhood parks into playgrounds and also opened gymnasiums. Calling attention to the correlation between strong bodies and Hindu religion, they also saw in strong Bengali bodies a challenge to colonial charges of effeminacy.

**Scout Training and Fitness in the Park**

In 1927, *bhadraloks* across Calcutta launched a playground movement. They argued that the central park of the city, the Maidan, was inconveniently located. For that reason, the city dwellers should exercise in their neighborhood parks. The playground movement tried to inspire the Bengalis to engage in physical activities in the neighborhood parks. The clubs equipped the parks with the necessary gear and transformed these into exercise grounds.

S. K. Kar, a government employee, who lived in Bhowanipur, led the playground
movement in his *para*. That year, he was on leave from work and spent most of his
evenings at the park in his *para*.³⁸ He observed that the elder boys had a hold over the
park. This scared away the younger boys. Kar felt concerned about the health and
happiness of the younger boys. He argued that if they did not get a chance to improve
their fitness, they could not grow as useful city dwellers.

To bring the boys back to the park, Kar organized sports competitions on Sunday
afternoons. He distributed books and pencils to attract the boys. They started coming
back in small numbers; a month later, their numbers had increased. Kar decided to
expand his small enterprise to a full-fledged institute. He approached the other
*bhadraloks* of the *para*, and together they formed the “*Balak Sangha*” (Children’s Club).

As Kar pointed out, playgrounds imparted an education that textbooks could not.
He instructed the boys in the Baden-Powel system of scout training and drills. He also
taught them team games like “follow the leader”, “staff drill”, and the “pyramid”. These
games improved the hand to eye coordination, shaped alert minds, and instructed the
boys to promptly follow orders. Further, drills and games instilled in the boys methodical
habits, good manners, punctuality, cleanliness, truthfulness, and regularity: values that
Kar argued the boys had to learn to live in the city.

In 1931, S. Mozumdar, editor of the health journal *Physical Fitness*, reviewed the
physical exercise routines at the *Balak Sangha*. He argued that although the *Sangha* was
effective in improving the health of the boys, it did not address an “Indian physical
standard” in the exercises.³⁹ He explained that an Indian standard was important as bodily
growth in the Bengalis took place at a rate different from that of the Europeans. He
explained that the Sangha should carry out anthropomorphic surveys and tailor its fitness regime accordingly.

Following the advice of Mozumdar, Balak Sangha carried out anthropomorphic surveys of not simply the boys at the camp, but the entire para. The volunteers of the Sangha recorded the height, weight, and wrist measurements of men and women. They then advised the para on a system of Hindu nutrition and hygiene.

The Balak Sangha revised its fitness routine to match the needs of the Indian body. The Sangha still followed the Baden-Powel system of scout training, but translated it to meet the standards of Hindu bodies. In these adaptations, it conflated the Indian with the Hindu: Hindu devotional songs and reading of religious texts became common at the Sangha. Every morning the boys performed prayers and sang songs that praised the power of the Hindu gods. Instead of the exercises suggested by the Baden-Powel system, the bhadraloks instructed the boys in wielding the lathi, or Indian clubs; they also encouraged the boys to learn yoga, asana, martial arts, and wrestling, all of which they described as exercises fit for the Hindus.

Fitness exercises at the park displayed strong Bengali bodies and bred normative assumptions about what constituted the bhadralok. Extolling the physical aspects of manliness, these exercises challenged the colonial portrayal of the bhadralok as effeminate. Clean, healthy, and upright male bodies indicated discipline, decency, and productivity. The physical routine at the parks then provided visual evidence that Bengalis were both moral and muscular.

The Balak Sangha is also a classic example of bhadralok efforts to discipline the conduct of men and women, effected through transitions in urban space. As the boys
performed their drills, the bhadraloks drove away the poor, the venders, and people they considered “suspicious”. They also discouraged mixed groups of men and women to walk or sit in the park. The boys kept the park meticulously clean. Every morning, they trimmed the bushes and cleaned the grounds. The sanitized spaces of the park then embodied the bhadralok values of cleanliness and spatial hygiene.

In addition, the Balak Sangha organized competitions in music, dance, story telling, and comic sketches in the para. It opened a library that encouraged essay writing, painting, engraving, and also published an artistic hand-written periodical in Bengali. In all these creative efforts, the Sangha encouraged Hindu cultural productions. The books that it housed in the library were on the lives and deeds of Hindu men; the artistic talents it encouraged celebrated “Hindu values” of fitness, compliance, and empathy.

*Tarun Sangha (Youth club)* was yet another club that organized a week long scout training camp in the para. The camp took place in a neighborhood park; the campers were young boys of the para. At the camp, *Tarun Sangha* offered lessons in lathi-khela or stick fight. The *Sangha* argued that the camp would revitalize and expand the horizons of lathi khela. They suggested that this was important as stick fights had a remarkable history in Bengal; it was the “tradition” of the Hindus that lost popularity with the Mughal and the colonial rule. They argued that “real Hindu men” were experts in lathi khela. Training the para in lathi khela could then shape strong individuals and also preserve the lost art of the Hindus. To this end, the *Tarun Sangha* held rallies where spirited young boys engaged in lathi khela and danced along the street with drums.
Additionally, the Tarun Sangha instructed the campers in mukul niti (cadet law). This involved special skills of tying four knots - sheet bend, reef, bowline, and clove hitch - on flags. In Hindu religion, threads and knots have symbolic meanings. While some knots represent granthis (extrasensory roots of ultimate realizations), others represent segments of sacred hymns. As “true Hindus” the Tarun Sangha instructed the boys in the meaning of these knots, and the perfect way to tie these.

Scout camps were open only to the young men of the para. The clubs did not allow women to take part in these. For the women, they erected separate covered enclosures inside the park, away from where the boys practiced their exercises. When the boys practiced their drills in the playground, women gathered in these enclaves to receive instruction in domestic hygiene and nutrition. These lectures taught them to maintain healthy families and keep their houses clean.
Notions of refinement, or bhadrá behavior also informed the daily lives of the bhadramahila. The bhadramahila can be best described as “the mothers, wives and daughters of the many school masters, lawyers, doctors and government servants who made up the English-educated professional Bengali middle class or bhadralok”\textsuperscript{41}. The idea of the bhadramahila took shape as part of the bhadralok efforts to restructure society on their own terms; as leaders of both social and cultural spheres, they hoped to construct a new image of Hindu women who could uphold and maintain their status. In constructing the image of the bhadramahila, the bhadraloks therefore rejected the issue of individual identity of women. Instead, they inscribed on women certain cultural as well as ideological markers of a particular image of Hindu femininity that complemented their authority. In such efforts, they described domesticity, obedience to family, sexual control, and child rearing as the virtues of bhadramahila.

As in the case of bhadraloks, the everyday spaces of the para also molded the identity of the bhadramahila. For instance, bhadraloks argued that bhadrá women did not spend too much time on the streets or engage in conversations with men outside their family. Their gatherings at the clubs therefore did not include women. The Four Arts club in south Calcutta had attempted a mixed coterie of men and women, but the experiment was short lived.\textsuperscript{42} Bhadraloks who lived in the neighborhood described the club bringing down the moral health of the para. They argued that women at the clubs spent too much time outside their home, and were not bhadrá.

It was at this time that the bhadraloks explained, with renewed emphasis, that courtesan performances at Durga Puja were obscene. They described the courtesans as deviants, as they refused to follow the norms of bhadrá behavior.\textsuperscript{43} According to the
bhadraloks, the dress, speech, and behavior of the courtesans did not uphold ideals of domesticity or self-control. Instead, they behaved in ways that were exact opposites of what the bhadrā entailed. For that reason, the bhadraloks described them, and all public women as “prostitutes” and took steps to expel them from the para.

III. The Gendered City

In the early nineteenth century, separate neighborhoods for prostitutes did not exist in Calcutta. Their kothas (brothels) adjoined the bhadralok houses. As Bhubonmohan Mukhopadhyay wrote in The secret tales of Haridas (Haridaser Guptokotha): “they [prostitutes] lived near middle class houses, boys schools, lived on top of the puritan’s heads and in Brahmo temples”.44

As the bhadralok decided the norms of bhadrā behavior, they called for excluding from their para those women who did not follow these norms. In 1925, Kaliprashanna Roy, a journalist, expressed his concerns over women dancers living near his house.45 He feared that these “prostitutes” would corrupt the minds of the female members of his family. A schoolteacher living in the same neighborhood supported Roy. He wrote that in addition to the dancers, women laborers living near his house dressed, spoke, and behaved in ways unacceptable in the para.46

In the late nineteenth century, the colonial state had targeted certain groups of Indian women for spreading disease among the British troops. It had passed strict laws to regulate sexual relations between these women and the British soldiers.47 The bhadralok anxiety over public women, however, was very different. More than disease, they feared that these women contrasted the norms that they had set for women. Both Roy and the schoolteacher, for instance, wrote little of the threat that “prostitutes” extended to the
health of the *para*. Instead, they appeared more concerned that these women would corrupt the minds of *bhadramahilas*.

Consequently, several editorials that the *bhadraloks* wrote echoed Roy’s demand of expelling public women from their *paras*. In 1928, J. N. Ghosh, a schoolteacher wrote an editorial on the steady increase in the number of “prostitutes” in his *para*.48 He described these women refusing to follow the norms of *bhadra* behavior. They met and befriended men outside their families, and refused to dress and behave in ways that the *bhadraloks* mandated for them. He also observed that they “spent too much time in the streets, often ignoring the work that required them to be at home”.49

Meeting at the clubs, the *bhadraloks* described women who did not follow the *bhadra* codes of behavior as “prostitutes”. This group included musicians, dancers, shopkeepers, laborers, and domestic workers. In other words, these were women who refused to accept only domestic roles. When the *bhadraloks* discovered that the number of “prostitutes” was only increasing with time, they appealed to the municipal corporation to assign separate *paras* for these women.50

The ordering of space in the *para* then constituted one of the primary ways through which *bhadraloks* created templates for refined behavior. As they ordered physical space in their *para*, they created models of ideal places that instructed men and women in *bhadra* conduct. The crafting of the *bhadra* identity then took place in the spaces of the *para*, in the very acts of daily living: everyday meetings at the clubs, in their behavior in the streets, in health exhibitions, fitness regimes at the parks, and through the segregation of the *bhadra* and *abhadra*. *Paras* provided both the physical
setting and the medium through which the *bhadraloks* expressed their strategies and concerns.

Working with the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, the *bhadraloks* forced public women of their *para* to move to new neighborhoods. Known as “districts”, these neighborhoods were located at a distance from their houses. For instance, Christmas cards that the women performers sent to the *bhadraloks* show that by the early twentieth century, their houses clustered in the neighborhood of Rambagan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Address</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tarubala Dasi</td>
<td>7/1, Maniktola Street, Rambagan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ranibala Dasi</td>
<td>7, Dayal Mitra Lane, Rambagan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sneholota Dasi</td>
<td>9, Dayal Mitra Lane Rambagan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monoroma Dasi</td>
<td>2/1, Rambagan Lane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemantakumari Dasi</td>
<td>1, Dayal Mitra Lane Rambagan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annapurna Debi</td>
<td>10, Dayal Mitra Lane Rambagan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animabala Dasi</td>
<td>9/3, Dayal Mitra Lane Rambagan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Names and addresses of public women on Christmas cards, *Field’s Christmas Cards*.

*Bhadralok* social rule in the *para* therefore aimed at crafting new identities for women. For example, all through the 1930s, *bhadraloks* organized special health shows for the women of their *para*. In 1930, the club *Saroj Nalini Association* in south Calcutta arranged for a health show, specially for women.\(^5\) The show took place in a centrally located park in the *para*.\(^6\) The club invited health experts to instruct women in domestic hygiene. Dr. D. N. Mitra, instructed the women in processes of filtering water so that their families did not suffer from water born diseases. He also advised women on Hindu nutrition and new ways of preparing meals.

These health shows made it clear that the *bhadraloks* assigned women with essentially domestic roles. Consequently, they disregarded those women who refused to follow these roles. The expulsion of public women from the *paras* drew a clear line...
between what the *bhadraloks* considered as acceptable and what they did not. This line, however, could hardly prove effective because of the agency that the public women had in redrawing it.

In the mid twentieth century, Manada Devi lived in a brothel in Sonagachi, a prostitute district in north Calcutta. Her memoir clearly shows that the separation between the *bhadralok paras* and the districts was far from complete.53 In 1927, a violent flood ravaged North Bengal. A central committee under the famous scientist Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray decided to set up volunteer groups in the *paras* for relief work. Women of the districts joined the *bhadraloks* in this work. Women from Sonagachi, Harkata, Rambagan, Chapatola, Aheeritola, Jorasanko and Simla - all prostitute districts - formed volunteer groups to raise funds for flood relief. They walked, danced, and played music on the streets to spread awareness of the immense ravages that the flood had caused.

Their processions went out two times everyday. Nearly sixty women from the districts walked in these processions. Manada describes the feelings of incredulity that overtook the *paras* as she walked its streets in broad daylight. Women holding flags of the district led the processions. On the rear end, walked women who held small pieces of cloth, where they collected donations.

Manada wrote that the *bhadraloks* made no efforts to stop the processions from entering their *paras*. The women walked the streets singing songs and the men who accompanied them played their clarinets. Men and women who lived in the *paras* were in fact drawn to the music and made generous donations. Manada later handed over these donations to the *bhadraloks* who used it for flood relief.
In a similar way, the *Rambagan Nari Samiti* under Rajbala, a musician, also made significant contributions to the *bhadralok* clubs of the nearby *paras*. Similar to the procession of Sonagachi, the women of Rambagan walked the *bhadralok paras* and collected donations. At end of every day, they handed over food, clothes, and medicines as flood relief to the *bhadraloks*.

Women who acted in theaters also donated their earnings to the *para* clubs for flood relief. Shwetangini and Heera who acted in Bhikarini Theater handed over their incomes to the *bhadraloks* for flood relief. Rajbala Dasi who performed in “Noromedh joyygo”, which was a huge success in Calcutta. She later handed over the money to the *bhadraloks* to buy food and medicines for the flood victims.

The *bhadraloks* accepted the contributions of the women, but refused to offer them a chance to return to the *para*. In 1956, Indubala, a musician who lived in Rambagan established the “Samaje Uppekhito Patita Narider Sommelon” (Association for socially ostracized fallen women). The association held weekly meetings to discuss the exclusions that they experienced everyday. Their districts lacked basic civic facilities: neither the Municipal Corporation, nor the *bhadraloks*, invested in building proper streets, sewers, health associations, hospitals, schools, and parks in these spaces.

Exclusion, therefore, was the norm in the districts. Excluding the public women, the *bhadraloks* outlined what they did not consider *bhadra*; this, in turn, shaped what they considered *bhadrā*. Indubala described the *bhadraloks* as “provisional friends” who accepted their contributions, but refused to acknowledge it. Instead, to uphold their *bhadrā* identities, they routinely expelled public women from the *para*. Indubala’s
writings, however, at times celebrate this segregation. As she explains, living in the
districts she was able to resist the homogenizing norms of bhadrá behavior:

Everyone in this world tells us go to the bhadrapalli (respectable
para) build schools there, donate things, teach, etcetera. I cannot
spend a life of austerity, as Chatterjee’s daughter or Mukherjee’s
wife. My son knows that when he will build a house in the
respectable para, I will not be able to go there. I don’t know where
I will die. But I hope to die in this para. ⁵⁸

As the prostitute districts grew as separate geographies, it represented the “other”
of the para. The figure of the prostitute remained central to these districts, embodying
practices that the bhadraloks considered unacceptable. Condemning the prostitutes, they
argued that these women would transform a morally ordered family space into an
immoral and sexualized space. For that reason, they considered the prostitutes as deviants
and expelled them from the para.

The experiences of women like Manada show how the bhadraloks mapped the
moral contours of society onto specific urban spaces. While state intervention and
policing had always tried to segregate the prostitutes, societal disapproval added the final
push. Widespread moral concern of the bhadraloks finally resulted in the segregation of
physical space, and with it, the segregation of public women to the fringes of urban
society.

IV. The Transformed Spaces of Sorbojonin Durga Puja

By the early twentieth century, the bhadraloks spoke openly of the vices spread
by the banias, and criticized them for “obscene” shows of wealth. At the heart of this
critique were the bania celebrations of Durga Puja, which was the most detailed display
of their wealth. The bhadraloks described these celebrations as improper, as a brazen
show of wealth. Arguing that the *bania* Durga Puja was bringing down the moral of the neighborhood, they called for a different celebration.

Far from the lavish rituals, Durga Puja arranged by the *bhadraloks* reflected their *bhadrā* virtues. From the very beginning, they kept these pujas open to the public, or *sorbojonin*, to display the democratic transitions of the *para*.\(^{59}\) *Bhadraloks* met at their clubs to organize the Puja. The rituals took place in the *mandap* or the decorated festooned spaces of the park or streets. The *para* dwellers paid a ‘*chanda*’ or subscription to meet the expenses of the Puja.

At the *bania* mansions, spontaneous creative exchanges took place between the Indians and the British on the days of the Puja. Kaliprashanna Sinha, for instance, describes these exchanges at the mansion of the Mitters. The Mitters had worked for the EIC as agents, and had built their mansions in north Calcutta. Sinha writes that for the Puja, models of equestrian Scot Highlanders, fairies, birds, flowers, and lotuses made of pith embellished the backdrop of the idol. The face of the idol resembled an Armenian woman. Paintings of gown-clad fairies playing the trumpet, bearing flags and insignias of the British Empire adorned the podium on which the idol was placed. In a similar way, replicas of the Queen's unicorn and the royal crest were also put on display.

In sharp contrast, anti-colonial sentiments informed the *bhadralok* Durga Puja. Several of their Pujas displayed the fight between Durga and Asura as an ethnic struggle. The bodily features of Asura increasingly looked like the British: the color of the skin, eyes, and clothes that the Asura wore resembled the British. Durga, on the other hand represented an Indian woman. The *bhadraloks* saw in Durga’s slaying of Asura, the confrontations of two different ethnicities, and the consequent victory of the Indians over
Upholding Hindu ceremonial rites, *sorbojonin* pujas marked the emergence of the *para* as a Hindu community. This was different from the *bania* Durga Pujas that saw creative exchanges between the Hindus and Muslims. While observing the Hindu rituals, the *banias* also invited Muslim courtesans to sing and dance for the occasion. Nurbaks, Ilhajan Banu, and Zinat, all famous courtesans, came from different parts of the country to perform at these Pujas. For their performances, the *banias* erected special dance halls and decorated podiums with gold and silver. Govindram Mitra, a wealthy *bania*, for instance, had built a room in his mansion with porcelain imported from China.\(^60\) Every year, during the Puja, courtesans from across the country visited him to perform in this room.\(^61\)

As they defined the ideal *bhadramahila* as domestic, and a nurturer of the family, the *bhadraloks* censured courtesan performances as “obscene”. Inside the Puja *mandap* they encouraged cultural programs that celebrated the authority of the Hindu gods. These included songs, dance, and plays that marked the “Hindu values” of hygiene and cleanliness. Additionally, *bhadraloks* led the young boys of the *para* in performing gymnastics and wrestling that displayed the strength of Hindu bodies.

Simla Byayam Samiti, a club in north Calcutta, first celebrated the *sorbojonin* Durga Puja in 1926. Atindranath Bosu established the club to train the boys of the *para* as morally and physically courageous city dwellers. The club in its earliest days taught the neighborhood boys in body building exercises, wrestling, and *lathi khela*. On April 20, 1929, the *Calcutta Municipal Gazette* wrote:
We would like to take the opportunity of offering our sincerest congratulation to the authorities of the Simla Byayam Samiti on the splendid work they are doing for the improvement of the physique of the boys and young men of North Calcutta must be covered by gymnasium like the Simla Byayam Samiti before we can hope to see our young men stand with their heads erect and walk with their chest forward.

Bosu's eldest son, Amarendra Bosu showed excellent skills in lathi khela. He traveled with the young boys to perform lathi khela in cities outside Calcutta. The Simla Byayam Samiti also organized stick fighting and wrestling competitions in the club compound.

The club schooled the boys not simply in fitness, but in a Hindu physical culture. It argued that this physical culture was the first step in becoming true bhadraloks. The club premises housed the idol of a Hindu goddess, surrounded by equipments for exercise. Here Bosu, along with the bhadralok of the para, instructed the boys in body building exercises and lathi khela.

Figure 7: The Simla Byayam Samiti club premise, (1927) [Source: Simla Byayam Samiti Sorbojonin Durgotsaver shonkhipto itibritto (1926-2000) Pamphlet by Sanat Ganguly and Asok Das, 2000]

The club organized Sorbojonin Durga Puja to organize the youth through the worship of Durga. Bosu conducted the sorbojonin Puja rituals on the principles of “Matri Aradhana” or worship of the goddess as the mother. In the mandap, surrounding the idol, the bhadraloks displayed miniature clay idols of famous Hindus. Posters displayed a variety of messages that celebrated a Hindu physical culture. In the Samiti yards, the
youth demonstrated physical feats. They performed wrestling, dagger displays and *lathi khela*.

![Image](image_url)

Figure 8: Wrestling at the Akhra at *Simla Byayam Samiti* (1927) [Source: *Simla Byayam Samiti Sorbojonin Durgotsaver shonkhipto itibritto (1926-2000)* Pamphlet by Sanat Ganguly and Asok Das, 2000]

Women participated in these Pujas, organizing rituals and prayers. They did not play a part in the displays of physical fitness. On the final day of the Puja, they engaged in *sindur-khela*, where married women applied *sindur* or vermillion on Durga’s feet and then on their forehead. This ritual was emblematic of the *bhadralok* construction of *bhadramahila* as symbols of domesticity; it displayed their role as the wife and mother, over and above everything else.

The Bagh Bazaar Sarbojonin Club also organized a widely admired Durga Puja. In 1919, when a *bania* had refused a group of young men entry to his Puja, they got together to celebrate their own Puja. This was the Nebubagan Baroyaari Puja, which took place in the streets of the *para*. The Samiti, however, soon faced difficulties in finding a proper spot to erect the *mandap*. Finally in 1926, Pashupati Basu, a schoolteacher, led the *bhadraloks* of the neighborhood in transforming the Nebubagan Baroyaari Puja to a *sorbojonin* Durga Puja.

The *bhadraloks* who organized the Bagh Bazaar Sorbojonin Puja described it as a racial strife between the Bengalis and the British; they saw in Durga’s slaying of Asura, a victory of the Bengalis over the British. They argued that in this racial strife, a martial
spirit was inherent that required high levels of physical fitness. To this end, they proposed “Virastami” or celebrations of physical fitness inside the _mandap_.

In September 1930, the Bagh Bazaar Sorbojonin Club organized a Virastami festival inside the _mandap_. They observed _Rakhibandhan_ or tying of wristbands to mark a Hindu brotherhood before the Virastami actually commenced. The Virastami celebrations began with the boys and girls of the _para_ playing Hindu devotional music. Following this they took part in parades, swordplay, dagger display, weight lifting, jujutsu, boxing, wrestling and high jump. Boys of the nearby _para_ clubs _Saila Siksha Mandir_ and the _Khevali Sangha_ also joined them in these exercises. The president of the club, Subhas Chandra Bose, mayor of Calcutta, delivered a speech on the benefits of sports and exercises. He proposed that the _para_ observe Virastami every year.

It is important to note here that with nationalists like Subhas Chandra Bose presiding over the Durga Puja, there was significant nationalization of the celebrations. For instance, the Bagh Bazaar Club dressed up Durga in _khaddar_, the national fabric, and the nationalists asserted that the physical culture put on display at the Pujas were efforts of the Bengalis to protect the Hindu nation. The nationalists also recruited the boys who performed physical exercises as volunteers in their anti colonial demonstrations. But at the same time, the _bhadraloks_ who organized the Durga Puja saw in it a powerful assertion of their growing authority in the city. It staged their role as advocates of Hindu hygiene, and supporters of healthy bodies. They imagined and channeled their new roles through the practices of Durga Puja. The physical mass of the _para’s_ spaces did not construct their identity; it emerged from the narratives embedded in them.
V. Conclusion

The *para* provides a lens to understand power relations embedded in everyday practices in the city. In the early twentieth century, these power structures were different from the authority exerted by the state and the nationalist efforts to force into existence a Hindu nation. Instead, kin like ties of the *para* facilitated the *bhadralok* government, which engaged in “watching over” the *para*. In crafting these everyday routines of surveillance – through clubs, health associations, and scout camps - *bhadraloks* asserted the triumph of “middle class values of hygiene” rather than extending nationalist spatial imaginations.

Channeled through space, the crafting of the *bhadra* identity was not merely physical, but also social. It dialectically engaged space with identities, shaping social etiquettes that required city dwellers to behave in specific ways in the public spaces. This behavior was not the natural to the men who performed them. Instead, the *bhadraloks* enacted and perpetuated a daily life that was a specific response to particular material and historical conditions. In such efforts, they simultaneously carried out two processes: they eliminated the material conditions that disciplined them, while reproducing it in their own activities. For instance, they employed a Hindu science of hygiene to resist the standards of British hygiene. This Hindu hygiene then became the bulwark of their autonomous government in the *para*, while remolding the spaces of the *para* to reflect their ascendency.

This view of the city, imagined under the hegemony of the *bhadraloks*, can then be contrasted with the view of the city as an embryonic space of liberal citizenship and platform for emerging urban conscious. Indeed, concerns of hygiene in the *bhadralok*
discourses on the city crafted new exclusionary policies. Endorsing the normativity of the Hindu spatial hygiene, the *bhadralks* argued that it should be applied to all spaces of the city. This, in turn, mandated the exclusion of “disorderly others” who refused to follow the *bhadralk* directives. As I will show in the next chapter, the *bhadralks* targeted the lower castes, who contrasted the customs of Hindu hygiene, segregating them and arguing that their neighborhoods should remain away from the *bhadralk paras*. 
the ‘abhijat’ men, who acquired their fortunes in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were far from a cohesive group. They demonstrated considerable heterogeneity with respect to


2 Here, I have used Calcutta to mean two different geographies. While under the banias, it was mostly Sutanuti, the northernmost of the triad of riverside villages. Under the bhadraloks it corresponded to the town of Calcutta bound by the Circular Road and with the suburbs. These boundaries included Circular Canal and Topsia Road in North and East, Russa Road and Tollygunj Circular Road to the South, and Hooghly river in the west. (Source: S.W.Goode, Municipal Calcutta, its institutions in their origin and growth. Calcutta: Bibhash Gupta, 1986), 8.


5 The debate on who the bhadralok was, is dense. Overall, they can be described as the English educated, civilized group, marked for their refined behavior and engagement in the cultural life of the city. In one of the most recent works on the bhadraloks, Tithi Bhattacharya has shown the centrality of education in crafting bhadralok identities, see, Tithi Bhattacharya, The sentinels of culture: class, education, and the colonial intellectual in Bengal (1848-85), (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 23.

6 This is similar to Norbert Elias’ definition of the civilizing process. As Elias explained, etiquettes and manners of the body reflect the social structure within which individuals live. Norbert Elias, The Civilising Process, (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), xiii.


8 S.N. Mukherjee, Calcutta: Myths and History, (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1977), see Appendix I.


10 Bhabani Ray Choudhury, Bangiya Sabarna Katha, kalikhetro Kolkata, 2006(reprint), 37

11 Haradhan Dutt, The Dutt family of Wellington Square, 1869, pp. 45-49

12 Ibid

13 Ibid

14 Dinabandhu Chatterjee, A Short sketch of Raja Rajendro Mullick Bahadur and his family, (1917), 16

15 Kiranacandra Datta. Bagabajara: atipuratana nahe, Madhya o Bartamana yuger citra. (Kalakatā: Bamlāra Mukha Prakasana: Mukhya praptisthana, De'ja, 2009 [reprint]), 242-262

16 Ibid

17 Kissory Chand Mitra, Mutty Lall Seal, (Calcutta, 1869), 35


19 Dutt, The Dutt family, 93-95.


21 Samachar Darpan, October 1832.

22 Satyendranath Tagore, The autobiography of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore. (Calcutta: S. K. Lahiri & Co.1909)

23 In Sanskrit, the word ‘bhadra’ means refined, privileged, and propertied. Bhadraloks, however, were far from a cohesive group. They demonstrated considerable heterogeneity with respect to social (including caste) position, intellectual, and cultural values. Broadly, the group comprised the ‘abhijat’ men, who acquired their fortunes in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as
business agents of the British, and the ‘grihasta’ or ‘madhyabitta’ bhadrakor, a middle-income
group characterized by English education, professional occupations, and salaried (rather than
entrepreneurial) status. It is this latter group that has come to be associated most powerfully with
24 Dipesh Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe postcolonial thought and historical difference
adda in constituting the Bengali identity.
25 The Calcutta Municipal Gazette, March, June, 1930
26 The Calcutta Municipal Gazette, January, 1925
27 The Calcutta Municipal Gazette, March 1926
28 “Ward health Association” The Calcutta Municipal Gazette, March 1925
29 “Ward XI” Calcutta Municipal Gazette, March 1926
30 Ibid
31 The Calcutta Municipal Gazette, November 1927.
32 The Calcutta Municipal Gazette, September 1930
33 The Calcutta Municipal Gazette, July 1930
34 Mrinalini Sinha, Colonial masculinity: the 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' in
the late nineteenth century. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995)
35 A similar scout movement took place in countries that the British tried to colonize. See S.Mills,
“An instruction in good citizenship: scouting and the historical geographies of citizenship
education”, Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 38 (2013): 129. Also, Timothy
Parsons, Race, resistance, and the Boy Scout movement in British Colonial Africa. (Athens, Ohio:
Ohio University, 2004). Parsons argues that the British colonial regime sponsored scouting to
promote social stability and loyalty to the British Empire. Men and women in Africa, however,
saw scouting as an instrument of anti-colonial resistance to challenge British imperial control in
Africa.
36 Ramprasad Mukherjee, “Primary education in Calcutta, Retrospect and Prospect”, The Calcutta
Municipal Gazette, November 1929
24.
39 S. Mozumdar “The Municipal Control of Physical Education--I”, Calcutta Municipal Gazette,
March 1931.
40 The Calcutta Municipal Gazette, September 1927
41 Geraldine Hancock Forbes, Women in modern India (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge
University Press, 1996), 54.
42 The Calcutta Municipal Gazette, March 1930, 11-17.
43 Sumanta Banerjee, The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular culture in nineteenth
bhadrakors described the arts of the bani as obscene, and instead, patronized a new culture.
44 Bhubanchandra Mukhopadhyay, Haridaser Guptokotha, (1903), 12.
45 Sambad Bhaskar, November 22, 1856.
46 Ibid.
47 For instance, the Contagious Diseases Act of Calcutta, 1868 that targeted both the prostitute
and the client.
49 Ibid.
50 Reverend Herbert Anderson, “Calcutta’s Social Evil” The Calcutta Municipal Gazette,
November 1927.
51 The Calcutta Municipal Gazette, February 1930.
In 1910, the Santana Dharmatsahini Sabha, a club for devotional songs, first celebrated the Sorbojonin Durga Puja in north Calcutta. The Para came together under the Sabha to organize the ceremonial worship. The organizers of the Puja identified themselves spatially, as “residents of Balaram Basu Ghat Road”. The next year, “local residents of Teliapara Ramdhan Mitra Lane” in north Calcutta organized the “Adi Shyampukur Sarbojonin Puja”.

An account of the late Govindram Mitter and his descendents in Calcutta and Benares by a member of the family, Calcutta, 1869, 12.

Ibid, 23.

Calcutta Municipal Gazette, April 20, 1929.

Ibid

“Simla Byayam Samity Sarbojonin Durgotsaver shonkhipto itibritto (1926-2000)” by Sanat Ganguly and Asok Das (pamphlet).

Joseph S. Alter “Somatic Nationalism: Indian wrestling and Militant Hinduism” in Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 28, No. 3 (July, 1994), 558. Alter argues that somatic nationalism takes different forms: the drills and exercises of the RSS sevaks follow a more militant chauvinist model. Wrestling, on the other hand is more reformist, seeking to improve the individual body in a non-violent, non-sectarian way.

Ibid, 559.
Chapter IV

A New Black Town: 
*Bustees* and Recolonizing Calcutta

In the late nineteenth century, sprawling shantytowns or *bustees* were an indispensable part of Calcutta’s urban transition. Makeshift huts, occupying both public and private lands comprised its spaces. Differing in levels of informality, these huts shared a lack of secure tenure, basic infrastructure, and public services. Hundreds of thousands of people, however, lived in the *bustees*. Most of them had left their villages in the wake of natural disasters; a few others reached the city in search of employment.¹ In the bustling metropolis, they spoke little or no Bengali. They congregated with their compatriots to build huts, shops, and markets in their own languages. They erected these huts with plastic, and leftover construction materials, expecting to live there for a short time. They believed that the state would soon house them in more decent parts of the city.

In 1905, the Swadeshi movement transformed *bustees* from a temporary to a long-term housing option in the city. Swadeshi was an economic venture to invigorate indigenous economy in India. The volunteers called for a boycott of all goods manufactured in Britain. This, in turn, helped the Bengalis to establish their own mills and factories. In 1906, Dr. Rashbehari Ghose opened a match factory in Tollygunje. The next year, Dr. Nilaratan Sircar set up a soap factory. These factories triggered an influx of migrants, bringing in men and women not only from the countryside of Bengal, but from across the country. In the soap factory, for instance, the workers were men from Punjab; in the match factory, they came from Bihar.²
With the steady influx of the workers, the state almost immediately ran out of resources to house them. As I have already shown in Chapter 2, in 1911, the state had commissioned the Calcutta Improvement Trust to improve public housing. Far from housing the workers, the CIT acquired and demolished private properties, adding to homelessness in the city. This resulted in a housing famine. Faced with the shortage of affordable housing, the state now approved bustees as an effective way to house the migrants.

Once approved by the state, tin roofs of the bustees came up in all parts of the city. Growing along arterial thoroughfares, railway tracks, and municipal waste dumps, these extended as far as the outer edges of the upper caste Hindu paras. Men and women who lived in its spaces came from different parts of the country; they spoke different languages, and had diverse religious and caste practices. This difference informed their use of space, disengaging it from what the bhadralok prescribed as ideal.

In the 1920s, the management of filth – the concern over municipal garbage, dirt, and disease – made possible a new urban government of the bhadralok. Taking shape in the everyday spaces of the para, this government was autonomous of the state. Sharing kin like ties, bhadraloks met at their clubs to supervise the health of their para. They employed codes of Hindu spatial hygiene to clean its spaces and improve the health of men and women. Bustees stood in contrast to the adjoining bhadralok paras and, through it, constituted a space outside their control.

This contrast generated a backlash among the bhadraloks. Threatened by the growing waves of the working poor who lived in shantytowns and had widely different spatial practices, they began to look inward. To emphasize their difference from the
bustee dwellers, they increasingly described their paras as exclusively Hindu spaces. Schoolteachers played a lead role in warning the para about the dangers of the bustee. For instance, Dhurjyoti Prasad, a schoolteacher, argued that makeshift huts of Sikh taxi drivers and Madrasi laborers threatened the Hindu character of his para. In a similar way, Nripendra Kumar Gupta, another schoolteacher, petitioned the municipal authorities to control bustees near his para by controlling the language and religion of its residents.

As this chapter will argue, far from being unintended informal sprawl, bustees embodied new forms of social control in the city. At the heart of these new systems of control was the discursive production of the bustee as filth and waste. This took place most visibly in the colonial health reports, and later, in the writings of upper caste bhadraloks. Describing bustees as inscrutable spaces, these discourses involved a mimesis: bhadraloks produced bustees iteratively, in the course of repetitions that drew on, rehearsed, and remade colonial iterations of the black town. In other words, they viewed the bustee in much the same way as the white ruling class of the city viewed the black town.

Interestingly, such mimetic projection also shaped a new language of urban inclusion, through exclusion. As I will argue, the construction of the bustee as “other” in which rational planning could not prevail was in fact within the development discourse of scientific rationality and urban planning. Colonial health officers had earlier employed bustee as a linguistic tool to translate Bengali neighborhoods into “filthy” terrains, and then segregate and police its spaces. In these colonial productions, bustee was the spatial unit of the black town: while the black town was a construct, an idea, the bustee was the actual physical space, clearly defined that comprised the black town. In the early
twentieth century, *bhadraloks* repurposed this construct. For them, *bustees* served a dual purpose: first, as filth-ridden geographies, it served as the other of the idyllic space of the *para*. The discursive production of inscrutability was then possible only as a counterpoint to the classic construction of modern space as amenable to planning, and antithetical counterpoints played a crucial role in producing the *bustee*, and regulating it.

Second, discourses of abjection, citizenship, and public space worked together in the *bhadralok* surveys to form socio-spatial norms of appropriate bodies and actions in urban space. Pitted against the working poor, the upper caste Hindu *bhadralok* featured in these discourses as an idealized inhabitant of the city, the future “citizens”. Their focus on hygiene, allowed them to argue that the lower caste *harijans* lacked civic mindedness and were unprepared to grow as citizens. In their writings, the *bustees* emerged as the space that embodied the backwardness of the *harijans*. They then inaugurated a process of spatial *shuddhi*: sanitation campaigns that forced a Hindu spatial order on the *harijans*, and established the normativity of these customs in ordering city space. The rituals of spatial *shuddhi* did not endorse the cultivation of secular, modern, citizens. Rather it was status affirming: it produced filthy *harijans* who contrasted the cleanliness of the *bhadralok*, and through it, reinforced their authority.

**I. Bustees: A Shared Discourse in Urban Filth**

In 1935, Ramji Hansraj Kamani, a Swarajist from Bombay visited Calcutta. He surveyed the *harijan bustees* of the city, including a centrally located scavenger *bustee*. In this *bustee*, he observed upper caste, English educated *bhadraloks* riding their cycles and carrying out improvements. They reached the *bustees* before dawn, while it was still dark, and cleaned the streets, huts, and yards with brooms and baskets. Working
with the scavengers, they sanitized privies, flushed pools of stagnant water, and also disposed pails of excreta.

The *bhadraloks* whom Ramji saw in the *bustees* were *pracharaks* (volunteers) of the Harijan Sevak Sangh (HSS). The HSS was a Swarajist organization that worked for *harijan* uplift. Two events had led to its formation in 1932. The first was the Poona Pact signed between Gandhi and Ambedkar. The Pact declared “amongst Hindus no one shall be regarded as an untouchable by reason of his birth and they will have the same rights in all the social institutions as the other Hindus have”. The second was the caste Hindu resolution of 1933 to bring untouchability to an end. At a public meeting in Delhi, the upper castes, under nationalist Madan Mohan Malaviya, constituted the All India Untouchability League. They later renamed it as the Harijan Sevak Sangh.

The HSS comprised a central board and a network of provincial boards under the supervision of the center. At the head of the central board was the President who drafted the laws and the byelaws and arranged for funds to carry out improvements. He also selected the head of the provincial boards, or the *pratinidhis*. The *pratinidhis* ruled over smaller provincial boards, appointing volunteers or *pracharaks*. In Calcutta, the *bhadraloks* joined the HSS as *pracharaks*. To improve the conditions of the *harijans*, they carried out extensive *buste* cleaning programs. The HSS gifted them cycles to survey the *bustees* and report on them. This made the *pracharaks* popular as “cycle *pracharaks*”.

Although at the lowest rung of the HSS, the cycle *pracharaks* actually carried out its improvement work. They surveyed the *bustees*, met with residents, suggested improvements, and implemented these. Additionally, the HSS advised the *pracharaks*
to set personal examples through their improvement work. An ideal pracharak, according to the HSS, “left bed at two-thirty in the morning, read the Gita, ran four miles and walked two, and then cleaned the street for an hour”.13

Observing the pracharaks in the bustee, Ramji wrote that their work appalled him. Besides being an ardent supporter of the HSS, Ramji owned several metal factories in Bombay. At the time of his visit to Calcutta, severe tensions kept the workforce in these factories divided. He was therefore on the lookout for new ways to control the workers. Most workers in his factory belonged to the lower castes, and he saw in preserving caste hierarchies an effective way to control them. In the scavenger bustee in Calcutta, the sight of the upper castes cleaning streets and privies therefore worried him. He feared that such collaborations would dissolve the boundaries that existed between castes. He tried to persuade the bhadraloks to stop sanitizing privies, arguing that the “inherently unclean” lower castes should clean these.

Quite contrary to Ramji’s warnings, the pracharaks did not try to erase caste boundaries in their improvement work. Rather, their initiatives sharpened caste divides. For example, carrying buckets of excreta on their head, the pracharaks argued that the scavengers had failed to shape tidy havens on their own. They then described their campaigns as efforts to instruct the scavengers in hygiene. This inscribed filth with new meanings: it marked the upper castes as educators of hygiene, while associating filth with the lower castes.

Casteism echoed the colonial language of racism in the pracharaks work in the bustees. As early as the mid nineteenth century, colonial health officers had described Bengali neighborhoods, irrespective of caste, as bustees. In exposing the general
absence of hygiene among the Bengalis, *bustees* at this time underpinned colonial claims of “poor Indian habits”. Later, in the twentieth century, the *pracharaks* reconfigured the space of the *bustee* to challenge the arguments of British supremacy. Instead, their interventions in the *bustees* aimed at establishing their awareness of hygiene, and the lack of hygiene among the lower castes. Borrowing colonial metaphors of filth, they described *harijan* neighborhoods as *bustees*.

Crafting a new geography of the *bustees*, the *pracharaks* work crystallized issues that had heated up municipal debates for over a century. The first period (ending in 1924) corresponded to colonial writings on *bustees*. The reports of health officers demonstrated that they employed the term to mean Indian neighborhoods in general. For a considerable length of time, the health officers, municipal commissioners, and administrators had engaged in the social construction of *bustees*. A succession of images, statistics, and surveys stemmed from these processes of social construction. These images and surveys transformed Indian neighborhoods into *bustees* that were the spatial units of the black town. Health officers then depended on their moral judgment to suggest enhancements in hygiene. The second period runs from 1924 to the time of independence in 1947: the *bustee*, now seen as a social problem and an issue in urban planning, emerged as a national problem. The *pracharaks* invaded the *bustees* to recover data on demographic conditions, activities, origins and health of the *bustee* dwellers, producing reports that called for new regulations.

**Bustee: a colonial linguistic tool**

In 1863, the British government in India vested municipal authority in a new establishment, the Calcutta Municipal Corporation. Calcutta, at that time, did not have
an up-to-date conservancy system. The *mehters* (janitors) collected filth from the streets and dumped it directly in the nearby river Hooghly. The Corporation commissioned a central drainage scheme, and when that advanced sufficiently, the municipal commissioners decided to stop polluting the river. They ordered the *mehters* to collect filth from individual houses and discharge these into the main sewers at depots specially built for the purpose.

This system inconvenienced both the Bengali upper caste homeowners and the *mehters*. The upper castes refused to let *mehters* into their houses and the *mehters* failed to dispose filth.\textsuperscript{14} As complaints poured in from both groups, the corporation commissioned a Nuisance Department in 1885 to supervise conservancy work. To ensure proper disposal of filth, the state invested the Nuisance Department with powers to break into Bengali houses.\textsuperscript{15} This authorized state officials to inspect the interiors of Bengali houses, while making certain the proper disposal of filth.

These were the years after the Sepoy mutiny of 1857, and surveillance of Bengali houses assuaged state fears of conspiring Indians. The mutiny had shaken the roots of the Company rule and exacerbated the fear of revolts. In 1858, the transfer of power from the Company to the Queen also failed to quell possibilities of future rebellions. Meanwhile, anti colonial sentiments circulated in associations of the English educated Bengalis. The constitution of the Indian National Congress in 1885 further concretized pervasive British fears of conspiring Indians. The state now argued that Bengali neighborhoods needed more surveillance than before. Conservancy work provided the state with this opportunity, it empowered the improvement commissioners to enter Bengali houses and neutralize every single threat to the stability of the state.
William Simpson, a British surgeon, led the Nuisance Department in its conservancy work. He handpicked commissioners and trained them to undertake surveys of Bengali houses. As these commissioners quickly realized, Bengali houses were difficult to survey. The homeowners refused them entry as they belonged to different castes. Met with resistance, the commissioners broke into these houses. Sanitary Commissioner, J. Nield Cook, for example, did not inform inhabitants before entering their houses. He stormed into the houses and walked straight up to the privies.

This invasion of privacy infuriated the homeowners; they got together to prevent the commissioners from marching into their homes. They hurled papers soaked in shit, and pails of excreta, to keep the commissioners away.

The symbolism of hurling shit was more important than the actual physical harm it caused. Throwing shit at the commissioners, made shit central to Bengali identity. The commissioners explained that the shit protests were in line with the Bengali’s agenda to make their neighborhoods ungovernable. They reacted with horror at this transgression of what they considered legitimate protest. At the same time, they re-appropriated shit to argue that the Bengalis, primitive in their practices, should learn to hide their shit. They pointed to the dire lack of modern privies in Bengali houses where people lived like shit – packed one on top of the other, enduring each other’s excretions.

A few years later, when cholera broke out, Simpson drafted reports on the Bengalis’ inclination to live in shit. These reports carried striking portrayals of mounds of shit putrefying inside Bengali houses. This furthered colonial arguments of “peculiar Bengalis, dirty in the extreme” and their houses as “the reservoirs of disease.”
The cholera reports barely depicted germs as the specific cause for infectious diseases. Instead, health officers essentialized and pathologized the spatial environment of those diagnosed with the illness, tracing cholera to insanitary Bengali neighborhoods or ‘bustees’.

Derived from the Persian word ‘basati’, bustees in cholera reports had altogether new meanings. While basatis implied a cluster of Indian huts, bustees represented Bengali neighborhoods reeking in filth and disease. These representational strategies encoded colonial power; the semantic transformation of the bustees enabled the municipal commissioners to further their goals of surveillance and order restructuration.

As medical officer D. D. Cunningham, wrote:

One of the huge evils of Calcutta is the bustee or the land covered with closely built tiled huts. The most elementary principles of sanitation are grossly violated here. These bustee lands are the plague spots of the town, and every form of zymotic disease seems to endemically flourish in their congenial filth and squalor. The existence of these bustees has been condemned times without number. They are an acknowledged source of serious danger to public health their reconstruction on hygienic principles and even their extinction has from time to time been strenuously advocated by health officers.\textsuperscript{19}

Cunningham described bustees as the “huge evils” of Calcutta. The closely built structures of the huts, he explained, shaped an environment “congenial for filth and squalor”. He called attention to a gross violation of sanitation that characterized all bustees, and turned them into “plague spots” or breeding placed of plague. More importantly, he warned that the insanitation of the bustees had reached such levels that nothing less than complete demolition could improve its spaces.

Similar to Cunningham, health officer Simpson described bustees as threats to public health. He wrote that “sheer ignorance” drove “ill bred Bengalis” to live in the bustees.\textsuperscript{20} His report went ahead to suggest that living amidst their own bodily waste,
Bengalis ended up more savage than human. These reports carried a few cases of Bengalis defecating in the bustee streets. Without examining the conditions of the privies, he reasoned that such action proved that the Bengalis were uncivilized. He prescribed intense state intervention to civilize the Bengalis and train them to ‘repress their shit’. In other words, he expected the Bengalis to confess their putrescence, to announce their desire for civilization, and to make themselves available for reform.

Between 1890 and 1900, Simpson led researchers in arguing that bustees were the breeding grounds of cholera. Pointing to the dangers that these spaces extended to public health, he recommended greater segregation of bustees and the European neighborhoods. His relentless efforts to promote segregation had far-reaching implications for social control. Segregation guaranteed the British access to better-located parcels of land, forcing the Bengalis to cramp into the least desirable parts of the city. In establishing exclusively European districts, colonial authorities also found it easier to disregard the bustees. Consequently, bustees with very little modern amenities stood in stark contrast to the European districts, which boasted an excess of civic amenities.

European districts, in their differences from the bustees, had an important pragmatic appeal. These spaces celebrated the preeminence of European civilization and declared the power of the British over Calcutta. The British used the provision of public infrastructure – roads, sewers, and electricity- as instruments for broadcasting their power in the city. They built new streets that permitted the movement of government officials, such as sanitary inspectors, civil administrators, and the security, police and military forces. It was through these streets that the health officers reached the bustees.
They surveyed, categorized, labeled, and segmented the bustees to produce knowledge of the Bengalis.

In the late nineteenth century, these surveys reached a climax with the outbreak of plague. Dr. Sundari Mohan Das worked as a Plague commissioner for the Calcutta Municipal Corporation. Armed with Victorian ideas of sanitation, he marched into Bengali houses gathering information on its spaces and people. From these interventions, he concluded that plague brewed “in the many filthy purlieus of the native town, where the seeds of that [epidemics] and every other pestilence find constant shelter.”21 His surveys produced a typology of both the territory and population. Pointing to filth accumulating in the streets, these described Bengalis soiling and polluting the environment.

Plague reports, pointing to the peculiar habits of the Bengalis, added to existing discourses on the hopelessness of sanitary conditions in bustees. As early as 1863, the Royal Army Sanitary Commission had first expressed concern over “peculiar habits of people which in most respects are dirty in the extreme, amendment in the conversancy of a great portion of native towns is most hopeless.”22 The Commission then proposed the constitution of Town Improvement Committees to “civilize the Indians”. In 1869, the sanitary commissioner warned,

> it is a good thing to secure the cleanliness of the immediate environment of the troops, but they will never be safe as long as the native population and its towns and villages are left uncleaned to act as reservoirs of dirt and disease”.23

In 1882, a British report on "Indian Habits", echoed this view, arguing:

> The people of India must be made clean by compulsion until they arrive at that degree of moral education when dirt shall become hateful to them, and then they will keep themselves clean for their own sake.”24
With plague, these racialized theories of ‘dirty Indians’ imbricated legal discourses expanding the territory of the bustee. For the first time, the state passed enactments that offered a formal definition of the bustee. The Municipal Act of 1899 was a watershed in this direction. The Act described bustees as plots of land, less than ten cottahs (7200 square feet), occupied by mud huts. Other than the houses of wealthy merchants, Bengali huts were mostly mud huts occupying less than ten cottahs of land. The Act, therefore labeled nearly two-thirds of Bengali neighborhoods as bustees.

By bringing significant parts of Bengali neighborhoods under its purview, the Municipal Act of 1899 cleared the way for increased state surveillance. The Act approved two medical officers to survey the bustees on a regular basis. These officers had power to force entry into the huts and inspect its interiors. They kept a close watch on the huts, ordering improvements to further open up its spaces. For example, the commissioners complained that the mosaic like pattern of the bustees obstructed sunlight and proper ventilation. They advised hut owners to rebuild the huts in ways that facilitated sunlight and fresh air. This meant building windows, and at times, clearing the hut’s surroundings. This restructuration, while bringing in sunlight and air, also uncovered the huts interiors to the medical officers.

The Act empowered the commissioners to acquire those bustees where the hut owners resisted improvements. One such incident took Calcutta by storm. While extending Raja Dinendra Street to the north, the municipal commissioners ordered the landlords of nearby bustees to rebuild the huts. When the landlords refused, the commissioners forced them to pay fines and also acquired their bustees. Taking over
these bustees, the Corporation made fresh appraisals of land and fixed new rents. A new land tenure replaced the existing, making the municipal corporation the sole custodian of the bustee.

Before the enactment of the Municipal Act of 1899, bustee proprietors used to sublet vacant plots of land to a middleman. The middleman built huts, rented them, and decided rents. At the end of each month he paid a lump sum to the bustee owner. When the corporation started acquiring bustees, it appointed contractors. These contractors were altogether different from the middlemen. They collected rents and handed it over to the Corporation in return of a monthly salary. Unlike the middlemen, they did not erect huts or decide rents. The corporation received timely payments from the contractors without having to worry about his share. With the contract system filling the state coffers, the Municipal Act of 1923 outlawed subletting in the bustees.27 The Act fixed the rent that the contractors had to collect from the bustees and pay the corporation.

The new contract system, and the outlawing of subletting, marked the escalation of state regulations in the bustees. Far from being self-governing units, bustees embodied multiple layers of state power. At the very outset, the etymology of the word ‘bustee’ was itself tied to the state efforts to regulate Bengali neighborhoods. The state had complete authority in deciding the space that constituted the bustee: it passed enactments and also authorized commissioners to determine the space of the bustees and set territorial limits. On another level, going past lawful definitions, state authorities inscribed bustees with new meanings. This buttressed their efforts to bring as much city space as possible under their control. To implement this control, the state did not need,
nor build, new institutions. At the heart of their interventions were certain representations of space that justified the new regulations.

_Bustees_ then featured in the colonial health discourses as linguistic tools to translate city space into filth-ridden geographies. State authorities offered their own interpretation of what they saw in the _bustees_, translating the accidental into the usual. Surveys, health reports, and new laws carried out the discursive production of _bustees_, bringing vast sections of Bengali neighborhoods under the category _bustee_. For the state, this growing geography guaranteed better surveillance and a steady source of income.

As the state intensified its control over the _bustees_, the Municipal Act of 1923 reformed the constitution of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation. Surendranath Banerjea, minister of local-self government, was the key architect of this Act. He made provisions for the corporation to become more democratic. Under the new Act, the corporation was a two-tier city government looking after municipal affairs of the city as a whole. The new Act also extended franchise to groups of city dwellers who earlier could not vote. With these changes, the 1924 municipal elections witnessed the triumph of the Swarajists and the election of C. R. Das as the first Swarajist mayor of Calcutta.

_Swaraj, and the “modern” bustees_

Swarajist responses to the colonial trope of the _bustees_ varied from outright resistance to crafty manipulation. Their writings combined elements of a new power in a traditional figuration, attempting to integrate the _bustee_ while inscribing it with new meanings. _Bustees_ featured in their writings as the foremost critique of colonialism: its unplanned spaces displayed the failure of the state to plan urban space. In these
arguments, the Swarajists followed the colonial depictions of *bustees* as filthy hubs of disease. They, however, departed from the colonial discourse by pointing to the modern origins of *bustees*.

Mimesis registered both sameness and difference in the Swarajist writings on *bustees*. Although portrayed as geography of filth, the physical space of the *bustee* in these writings differed widely from the earlier colonial depictions. The state had earlier described all Bengali neighborhoods as *bustees*. The Swarajists challenged this view. They argued that ribbon development - an innovation of the Calcutta Improvement Trust – had opened broad boulevards that transformed the inner city neighborhoods into cesspools of disease.29 They explained that tall buildings bordered these boulevards turning hutments of the *harijans* into receptacles of filth, or *bustees*.

Within a few years of the Swarajists assuming office, the scavengers of Calcutta went on a strike. In July 1928, they demanded higher wages at work, and better supplies of water and electricity in their *bustees*.30 As the strike went on, filth heaped on the streets and the stench of unclean privies filled the air. With monsoon setting in, the relentless downpours putrefied the refuse that lined the streets. City dwellers cautioned one another that an epidemic was on its way.

Within a couple of weeks, the strike spread to the southern parts of the city. Street and sewer flushers, manhole boys, and brush men joined the scavengers.31 They met secretly in their *bustees* to discuss ways to convince the municipal officers to accept their demands. The Corporation, however, turned a blind eye. The officers described the protestors as “hoodlums” and paid little attention to their demands. The strike went on for weeks, with the hope of any negotiation dwindling over time.
Frustrated by the outcomes of the strike, a few scavengers chose to resume work. This led to sporadic street fights between them and the protestors. The Corporation seized on these fights to deploy the police and force the protestors to resume work. By the end of the month, a large reserve of police replaced smaller battalions. They made as many as seventy arrests, and several strikers suffered fatal injuries.\textsuperscript{32}

In 1924, when C. R. Das, had assumed office as the mayor of Calcutta, he had pledged to uphold municipal socialism. \textit{Bustees} featured routinely in his plans for \textit{harijan} uplift. He explained that the Swarajist goal was \textit{daridranarayan} or welfare of the poor \textit{harijans}, and that the Corporation was the \textit{Pouropita} or city father.\textsuperscript{33} To this direction, he led the Swarajists in initiating new schemes to house and educate the \textit{harijans}.

The scavenger strike, presented an altogether different picture of Swarajist interventions in the \textit{bustees}. The strike revealed that the Swarajists did not put their plans of \textit{daridranarayan} to practice. Far from improving their conditions, the commissioners refused to offer the scavengers even the basic amenities of urban life. In controlling the strike, they departed from their role as \textit{Pouropita} and deployed the police to waylay the protestors. Further, their indifference resulted in an impasse. As filth piled on the streets, the health of the entire city was at risk.

Urban landlords, a pressure group within the Swarajya Party, held back the Swarajists from emerging as \textit{Pouropitas}. These landlords were mostly merchants and bankers who owned surplus lands that they leased as \textit{bustees}. J. M. Sengupta, leader of the Bengal Swarajists, explained that without the support of these landlords, the party
could not continue at the Councils. He therefore ordered the municipal commissioners to avoid using force in their exchanges with the landlords. When the scavengers, manhole boys, and brush men demanded *bustee* improvements, the landlords refused. Earlier, the colonial health inspectors could force them to carry out improvements. The landlords agreed to these improvements, fearing that defiance could cost them their *bustees*. Under Sengupta’s directives, they stopped improving their *bustees*.

The Swarajist Corporation did little to persuade the landlords to improve their *bustees*. The wealthy traders, De family of Beadon Street, were landlords of several centrally located *bustees* in the city. Every year, they increased rents without improving sanitary conditions in these *bustees*. They also served eviction notices to more than hundred huts at the same time. Angry tenants routinely petitioned the Corporation, but the commissioners refused to step in. They argued that the landlords should have complete autonomy in improving *bustees*. In a similar way, Sailendranath Sinha, a banker, who owned large *bustees* in the Garcha neighborhood refused to improve the huts. He described improvement work as charity and stayed away from it. The Corporation, well aware of the poor condition of sanitation in these *bustees*, did little to improve these.

Instead, when the *bustee* dwellers protested against the poor conditions of the *bustees*, the Corporation deployed the police to control them. For example, during the scavenger strike, the police made several arrests in the scavenger *bustees*. The scavengers complained of police tortures and requested the mayor, J. M. Sengupta, to withdraw the forces. Sengupta, however, did not regard the incidents of police torture as
credible. Instead, he condemned the scavengers for using non-violence as the language of their protests and for staying off work.

This revealed a deep dichotomy in the Swarajist municipal policies: the Swarajists indulged in non-cooperation as a form of protest against higher authorities, but as municipal authorities, they advised the scavengers against identical action.

The Swarajists covered their defense of the landlords by upholding the idea of a “multipurpose Swaraj”. This meant that they would implement improvements on behalf of the landlords. At the Gaya Congress of 1922, C. R. Das had first put forward the idea of the “multipurpose Swaraj”. He had argued that organizing the workers and the urban poor was necessary to achieve Swaraj. But at the same time, he had argued against independent labor welfare organizations. Instead, he believed that a “multipurpose Swaraj” could bring together the harijans with the nation. Bustee improvement now became part of the Swarajist agenda. Municipal commissioners promised to carry out improvements, arguing that it would steer the nation towards self-government.

Swarajist plans of a multipurpose Swaraj, however, faced a setback when the state did not transfer necessary funds. Without proper funds, improvement work remained stalled for months. Baffled by the slow pace of sanitation work, many city dwellers suspected that the municipal commissioners were embezzling funds and using these to meet private expenses.

In 1926, the Bengali periodical Svasthya Samachar launched a campaign against Swarajist municipal administration. It published editorials that argued that besides embezzling funds, the Swarajists were obsessed with Swaraj, which was the reason for
their failure as municipal administrators. A cartoon published in the periodical in 1927, depicted the Swarajist councilor as “the leader of the famine”.

![Cartoon of Swarajist commissioner picking fruit from a tree labeled ‘Swarajist Fund’]

Figure 1: “The leader of the famine”, Svasthya Samachar, (volume 16), 1927.

The cartoon shows a Swarajist commissioner, bloated with self-pride, picking the fruit of the ‘Swarajist Fund’ from a tree. He carries the Congress flag, and is wearing the national fabric, *khaddar*. On the ground behind him lies nationalism and patriotism covered in a basket. The Swarajist stands strategically, turning away from the basket. On the top right hand corner, a boat laden with education, health, and improvement cruises into the horizon, blurring away from vision. The Swarajist seems engrossed with the fund, ignorant that the boat is indeed sailing away. That he stands on a platform shows that he has lost touch with reality.

Editorials in the *Svasthya Samachar* saw in the *buste*es the Swarajist failure to plan the city. These pointed to filthy huts, littered streets, and the lack of privies to argue that the Swarajists, obsessed with self-government, had failed to improve the city. These went on to argue that in a nation tormented by disease and poverty, self-government meant little to the people. The authors criticized the Swarajists for their
obsession with Swaraj, and called their plans for urban improvements “hollow promises”.

The fear of the bustees, had in fact reached an all time high with a cartoon that the Svasthya Samachar published in June 1926:

Figure 2: “The depots of disease in the city”, Svasthya Samacara IV (1926).

The cartoon titled “the depots of contagious diseases in the city” showed neighborhoods of the working poor as dens of disease. It portrayed the houses and workplaces of the working poor- the cook from Orissa, the domestic helps from the countryside, the itinerant vendor, and street side tea seller - as centers of contagion. As the cartoon shows, the figure of the worker was central to these spaces: it was their “filthy” bodies that made the city insanitary. This called for increased segregation and regulation of both the workers and their bustees.

Meanwhile, Rakhal Das Bhowmick wrote an article for the Svasthya Samachar in which he connected spatial to moral hygiene. He argued that living in filth, men and
women could perpetrate the most unlawful acts. For example, he showed that in the previous couple of years, harijan bustees across the city had recorded extraordinary instances of crimes. He therefore cautioned that the Swarajists, ill equipped to sanitize the city, were placing both the physical and moral health of the city dwellers in danger.

*Svasthya Samachar* now called for creative processes in the management of urban space. The editorial explained that the Swarajists had failed to keep the city clean. The authors pointed to a deep dichotomy that shaped the Swarajist municipal administration: while the hard labor of the harijans kept the city functioning, the Swarajists refused to improve living conditions in their bustees. Condemning this, they called for new agents of authority. They encouraged bhadraloks to take up improvement work beyond what the state and the municipal corporation were already carrying out.

**II. Bhadraloks, Cycle Pracharaks and their Bustee Campaigns**

For quite some time, bhadraloks had watched with horror as the bustees bordering their paras exploded and not an inch of space was left for new huts. Men and women who lived in the bustees arrived from distant parts of the country; they belonged to different castes, religion, and spoke different languages. This appalled the bhadraloks who did not approve the lower castes and Muslims settling so close to their para. They argued that this proximity threatened their caste purity. The editorials in *Svasthya Samachar* added to their fears.

Worried by the expanding bustees, scores of bhadraloks joined the HSS as pracharaks. The HSS at the time was implementing improvements in harijan bustees in all major cities of India. The members argued that years of upper caste discrimination
against the lower castes deteriorated living conditions in these bustees. Supervising sanitation work, they appealed to the upper castes “to rid their sins by guiding the lower castes to equality”. Bhadraloks responded to these calls, as they saw in volunteer work the chance to enter the bustees and inspect its interiors.

As pracharaks, bhadraloks produced new knowledge of the bustees. They carried out surveys and undertook censuses of bustees adjoining their para. These surveys codified the behavior of the harijans and produced stereotypes of “harijan habits”. One pracharak, for instance, prepared an inventory of “harijan habits’, and prescribed improvements to cure these habits:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Harijan Habits</th>
<th>Improvements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All harijans drink</td>
<td>Cleaning of harijans and bathing children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They live on thieving</td>
<td>Entering harijan houses, removing filth, and completely whitewashing the houses. Three houses reconstructed. Pracharaks visited the houses daily.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morals loose</td>
<td>Harijans made to promise that they would not touch pork.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They take part in riots</td>
<td>Harijans made to start their days with prayer. Light posts set up in the bathing ghats.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of them are literates</td>
<td>Schools set up. Pracharaks read newspapers and told them important news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lazy</td>
<td>Asked harijans to stay busy and pure. Pracharaks supervised work of the scavengers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanitation bad</td>
<td>Reconstructed huts, streets, bathing ghats. Built a street for the arrival of the Mahatma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the inventory clearly shows, the pracharak generalized alcohol addiction, theft, immorality, violence, and laziness as “habits” that all harijans shared. The improvements he suggested then drove to reform both the bustees and the harijans. He believed that the proper cleansing of space could impact the character of the harijans. To this end, he called for sanitizing bustees in ways that could reform the moral health of the harijans.
In its early days, Gandhi’s ideas of untouchability informed the pracharak work in the bustee. Departing from the sanatanist (Hindu traditionalist) views of the divine roots of untouchability, he described untouchability as “a human manufacture”. The idea of human manufacture implied that human agency produced untouchability. This also meant that the scriptures did not always authorize untouchability. This argument embroiled Gandhi in a debate with the sanatanists who emphasized the divine roots of untouchability. Lawyer Basant Kumar Chatterjee, for instance, pointed to the Vedas mentioning chandals and aspriyas. Gandhi challenged this view, explaining that asprisyas were not untouchables. Asprisyas, he described, meant morally impure; men and women of all castes could be morally impure, and hence, asprisyas.

Separating asprisyas from untouchables, Gandhi argued that untouchability was a “law of sanitation”, produced by the placement of human bodies in certain “material conditions”. The city, he argued, provided this material condition: slums constituted the physical space that facilitated the human manufacture of harijans. In such arguments, he differentiated between bustees and slums; while bustees meant the sanitized spaces of the villages, slums represented urban filth.

Immediately after signing the Poona Pact, Gandhi had set out on a tour of the harijan bustees. He prepared detailed reports of these tours. These reports, while recording his experiences in the bustees, also outlined the differences between the slum and the bustee. In 1931, he had led a procession of men with brooms, baskets, and spades in the harijan villages of Orissa. On reaching these villages, the procession had split into two. One group toured the village to retrieve information on its dwellers; the other group decided to sanitize its spaces. This second group soon discovered that it had
little to do, as the bustee was already clean and habitable; the walls and floors of the huts were plastered, the yards clean, and the cowsheds without a speck of dirt. Pointing to the staggering contrast with harijan slums in the cities, Gandhi wrote, “if man invented the Harijan bastis, the devil invented the Harijan slums” and that a “a man is a man in the harijan bustees, but a commodity in the urban slums”.49

Filth, which represented ‘Indian unhygiene’ in colonial health reports, now featured in Gandhi’s writings as the product of faulty town plans initiated by colonial planners. At the same time, filth sharpened the divides that existed within the Indian community: while the educated upper castes adapted to the norms of city life, the harijans struggled to keep up. As Gandhi argued, the failure of the harijans to comprehend the new spatial practices covered their bodies and huts with filth. This made filth central to their identity. In the slums, he met “little Harijan girls with dirty nails, dirtier noses and ears”, and men with “disheveled hair who rarely bathe and when they do bathe it is not specially clean water”, he found “it a trial to sit with them or anywhere near them, their persons gave a terrible stink”.50

Gandhi’s writings, thus, connected social to sanitary problems. Slums were at the heart of his thesis on the human manufacture of untouchability. He argued that colonial town plans widened differences between the city and the village, resulting in the unplanned spaces of the slums. For Gandhi, the village represented the essence of India. He argued that the city’s growing differences with the village resulted in the elimination of cultural and spatial practices of the villages, and hence, a loss of tradition. He saw in this loss, the germs of alienation. This alienation, he argued, filled city spaces with filth and carved the material settings for untouchability. Gandhi’s
solution for growing filth and untouchability, then, was to engage the upper castes in cleaning the filth and rags of the slums and training the “dumb driven people in the basic laws of Hindu sanitation”. 51

Given that these were the years immediately after the Poona Pact, Gandhi saw in urban improvements effective ways to integrate bustees with the Hindu nation. This was difficult as city space was unmistakably divided between castes, with the lower castes barred from entering the upper caste neighborhoods and public spaces. As filth piled on the streets of the harijan slums, the bhadraloks had turned a blind eye. Gandhi warned that this segregation, threatened not simply the health and order of the harijan bustees, but the entire city, “just as a rotten limb affects and corrupts the whole body, so does the slums of scavengers, representing the rotten limb of society, corrupts it”. 52 He advised the HSS, and the cycle pracharaks, to open the city – its streets, temples, inns, roads, public wells, schools, and crematoriums – to the harijans. He explained that equal rights to the city would in due course integrate the harijans with the Hindu nation.

The Pracharaks and Cycle Prachar

As the sieves of the HSS work in the bustees, the cycle pracharaks prescribed spatial upkeep that corresponded with certain codes of religious piety and spiritual purification. As it was explicit in their master plan for the project, the aim of bustee improvement was to reinstate a sense of homogeneity and physical unity through the elimination of practices that were distorting; the goal was to civilize the harijans while keeping them under the control of the pracharaks. This, in turn, served two purposes: first it established the moral authority of the Hindu upper castes over the harijans, and
second it tried to eliminate the non-Hindu practices in the bustees that adjoined their paras.

Armed with the goal of enforcing their moral authority, cycle pracharaks in Calcutta rejected Gandhi’s advice of opening the city to the harijans. Instead they argued that living in filth and excreta, the harijans were not yet prepared to access public spaces and upper caste neighborhoods. They warned that if allowed to enter the upper caste neighborhoods, the harijans would only spread disease. They then proposed that the harijans should perform “spatial shuddhi” or rites of purification before enjoying equal rights to the city.

In April 1875, the Arya Samaj, under the supervision of Dayanand Saraswati, had initiated a movement for shuddhi or purification. Drawing upon shuddhikaran mentioned in the scriptures, they prescribed new rituals, which involved rites performed with water and the consumption of milk and urine. Dayanand believed that shuddhi was an effective way to reconvert Hindus who had embraced Islam. The first recorded shuddhi took place in 1877, when he performed the shuddhi of a Muslim man. In the early 1900s, a follower of Dayanand, Shraddhanand worked on Sangathan, or the consolidation of the Hindus in North India. Over the next few years, shuddhi emerged as a powerful tool to consolidate Hindu ranks and galvanize the construction of a pan-Indian Hindu community.

As the pracharaks in Calcutta explained, spatial shuddhi would reorder space to eliminate non-Hindu spatial practices. At the heart of spatial shuddhi was a double wash: external and internal. For the external wash, the pracharaks sanitized streets,
huts, and installed water taps. Internal wash, on the other hand, meant cleansing of the soul. This mandated the chanting Ramnam and giving up beef and alcohol.

The pracharaks crafted spatial shuddhi on the idea that the harijans were Hindus. In such arguments, they drew on Knights of the Broom, a nineteenth century book by the civil servant Richard Greeven. Greeven in this book had surveyed the sweeper slums of Benares. He provided detailed accounts of their ritual lives. From the street songs of the sweepers, he argued that the Hindu god Nakul had created them to clean the stairway to heaven. Later, when the Muslims invaded, the Hindu sweepers cleaned their camps. This introduced them to the practices of Islam. The pracharaks followed Greeven in explaining that the harijans were Hindus, but departed from him in arguing that the Muslims did not simply introduce, but forced their practices on the Hindu sweepers.

Mahadev Desai, Gandhi’s personal secretary, led the pracharaks in explaining the Muslim rule in India was a period of moral decline. He pointed to Hindu men sanitizing Muslim privies as symbols of this decline. According to him, the Muslims had little awareness of hygiene and employed unsanitary methods to clean privies. He argued that the sweepers and scavengers were also unaware that their dirty work debased them in Hindu society. He therefore argued that it was “necessary to inculcate in him [the sweepers] the sentiment of repugnance to filth so abundant in the Hindus”.

Once the pracharaks had traced the roots of filth to the practices of Islam, they suggested wiping clean these practices through spatial shuddhi. Following Desai, they explained that their sanitary campaigns would teach harijans to renounce their “backward Muslim practices” and become respectable members of the Hindu society.
The *pracharaks*, seeing themselves as the natural leaders of their community, increasingly dabbled in these sanitary campaigns to bolster the number of their co-religionists.

Gandhi did not have much faith in *shuddhi*. He explained that the rituals would only show that the *harijans* were non-Hindus, and that the *pracharaks* were forcing them to convert.\(^{56}\) The *pracharaks*, however, paid little attention to Gandhi’s advice. Instead, they argued that spatial *shuddhi* could eliminate the corrupt religious practices of the *harijans* alongside the filth that covered their huts. Rejecting Gandhi’s advice, they drew inspiration from the work of Vindhya Babu, a cycle-*pracharak* from Bihar.\(^{57}\) Vindhya, in his sanitation drives, took pride in converting groups of *harijans* to Hindu religion:

> Formerly they [*harijans*] were addicted to drink and took meat and fish. They lived in unclean surroundings and breed swine. They did not keep their bodies clean. Now they have given up flesh, fish and drinks. They wear Tulsi beads and keep their houses and bodies clean.\(^ {58}\)

What Vindhya emphasized here was a behavioral reform that had to precede sanitary improvements in the *bustees*. A vegetarian diet, the wearing of Tulsi beads, and abstinence from alcohol were at the heart of this reform. He argued that only those *bustee* dwellers following this code of conduct, could keep their *bustees* clean. His work in the *bustees* drove to instill in the *bustee* dwellers this new behavior.

Inspired by Vindhya’s work, cycle *pracharaks* in Calcutta described their goal as “establishing a permanent and close contact with them [*harijans*] and transforming their whole life”.\(^ {59}\) In addition, they warned, “the Christian missionaries were already rushing to the scene [in the slums], doing nothing but providing a few amenities like a water pipe or a good road and making recipients declare they are Christians.”\(^ {60}\)
Resisting the missionaries’ efforts to convert harijans, shuddhi employed urban improvements to train the bustee dwellers in Hindu ethics of hygiene.

Spatial Shuddhi, A Process of Exchange

In its earliest days, spatial shuddhi was a process of exchange. The pracharaks carried out external wash in return of the harijans promises of internal wash. In several bustees across Calcutta, they forced the harijans to give up beef and alcohol in exchange of new water posts, electricity, clean streets, and modern privies. For example, in Mehedibagan bustee, the pracharaks paved the streets and installed new stand posts for water only when the bustee dwellers agreed to give up alcohol. A week later, they raided the bustee to check whether the residents were secretly consuming alcohol. Inspecting the yards, they planted Tulsi, a plant believed to be holy in the Hindu religion.

The residents of Mehedibagan bustee were mostly sweepers. They consumed alcohol for a variety of reasons, including its curative powers. A glass of Hadia, a local variant brewed with fermented rice, energized their bodies after a long day’s hard work. They consumed better varieties during festivals. For instance, they considered marriages incomplete without alcohol. While the sweepers did not consider alcohol as a setback for their spirituality, the pracharaks considered it as against divine dispensation. They argued that alcohol played havoc on the minds and bodies of the sweepers and wrecked the peace of their domestic lives.

The sweepers who lived in Mehedibagan bustee were mostly Muslims. The pracharaks planting Tulsi trees in their yards made them furious. Badruddin Khan, who lived in the neighborhood, complained that the pracharaks were far more interested in
internal, than external wash. He further argued that the water stand posts in the street where he lived were few and far off. Neighborhood women observed purdah and found it impossible to walk long distances and then stand in queues to fill their pails. When Khan informed the pracharaks about these difficulties, they refused to listen to him. Instead, they advised him to give up alcohol and beef before asking for new improvements.

Satish Dasgupta, a chemist by profession, led groups of cycle pracharaks in the bustees of Calcutta. In 1936, along with other cycle pracharaks, he lived in a densely packed rickshaw pullers bustee in south Calcutta. That year, three hundred men, women, and children had died of small pox in the bustee. Concerned by the rapid spread of the disease, and the resultant loss of lives, the rickshaw pullers decided to organize a lavish worship of Sitala, the goddess of small pox. They believed that a generous worship could appease Sitala and reduce the ravages of the epidemic.

On the day of the worship, the rickshaw pullers assembled at a small field at the center of the bustee. They erected a festooned podium, placed the idol of Sitala in it, decorated the nearby trees with lights, and played loud music. Throughout the day, they engaged in elaborate rituals, offering gifts and flowers to the deity. The rituals ended with animal sacrifices in the evening. The rickshaw pullers had informed the butchers, who provided them with cows, buffaloes, calves, goats, and rams. They marked the animals’ foreheads with vermillion, and slaughtered them in public.

Dasgupta and the pracharaks intervened at this point. They tried to dissuade the rickshaw pullers from slaughtering the cows. Far from underlining the brutality of such sacrifices, they offered a religious argument against cow slaughter. They explained that
the cow was an animal sacred to the Hindus; the rickshaw pullers, as Hindus, should therefore not slaughter cows. Their efforts, however, met with resistance. The rickshaw pullers ignored their advice and even refused to engage in any dialogue. The next day, they brought in more cows and slaughtered these in broad daylight. Slaughtering nearly twenty cows, they offered half the meat to the deity. With the remaining half, they organized a grand feast in the bustee.

The next morning, a young girl in the bustee contracted cholera. Dasgupta now seized on this incident to strengthen his campaign against meat eating. He argued that germs did not always cause cholera. By consuming beef, the rickshaw pullers had evoked the wrath of the Hindu gods, which resulted in cholera. He explained to the rickshaw pullers that clean streets and spotless huts were not enough to keep epidemics away. What was required was a change in behavior and a complete abstinence from beef and alcohol.

In May 1938, the pracharaks celebrated “harijan week” as part of their shuddhi campaigns in the bustees. Hindu organizations, such as the Gujarat Shakahaari Mandal (Gujarat Vegetarian association), the Arya Samaj Dalit Uddhar Samity (the Arya Samaj uplift of the lower caste association), and the Calcutta Harijan Sabha (Calcutta organization for the untouchables) assisted the HSS in organizing weeklong activities. The week commenced with bhadrlok traveling to the bustees and sanitizing its spaces. Groups of bhadrlok cleaned the streets and privies, while the others delivered lectures on the vices of beef eating and alcohol consumption. Sweeping the streets, they distributed pamphlets on the benefits of a diet that did not include beef. Cleaning the huts, they explained to its residents how alcohol could destroy their families.
Unlike the earlier *shuddhi* campaigns of the Arya Samaj that targeted individuals for conversion, spatial *shuddhi* tried to convert social groups. The *pracharaks* grouped the lower castes as “*bustee* dwellers” irrespective of the differences that existed between them. Their goal was to subject them to the disciplines of spatial *shuddhi*. Cutting across caste and linguistic divides, the “*bustee* dwellers” meant for the *pracharaks* a homogenous group who contrasted the Hindu-Bengali spatial practices of the *paras*. Intervening in the *bustees*, the *pracharaks* tried to enforce on its residents the codes of Hindu-Bengali behavior.

Spatial *shuddhi* campaigns were in fact predicated on the assumed hygienic threat that non-Hindu groups posed to the Hindu nation. For instance, when the *pracharaks* delivered a lantern lecture on Tuberculosis at Ripon Street in Hindi, although the crowd comprised Muslim *bustee* dwellers, they referred to Hindu scriptural texts to define good hygiene.\(^7^0\) When cholera broke out in the Muslim *bustees* of Kasai Mahalla, the *pracharaks* distributed leaflets on how to disinfect huts.\(^7^1\) These leaflets alluded to the Hindu scriptures, though the butchers were mostly Muslims.

Meanwhile, *harijan* week coincided with Durga Puja festivities in Calcutta. Durga Puja had by this time become emblematic of the growing authority of the *bhadraloks* in their *para*. In this backdrop, the *pracharaks* initiated a new ritual of spatial *shuddhi*: inter caste mixing. They believed in exchanges with the *harijans*, the caste Hindus could teach them hygiene.\(^7^2\) To this direction, they encouraged the *para* clubs to admit *harijans* to their Pujas and also made sure that the *harijans* and the caste Hindus used the same entrance to the *mandap*. After the Puja ended at night, the *pracharaks* guided the caste Hindus on a tour of the *bustees*. Visiting the *harijan*
bustees, they sanitized its spaces, planted flowering trees and trimmed overgrown bushes. The next day, they also allowed their children to play with the harijan children in the neighborhood parks.

Inter-caste mixings infuriated groups of harijans who argued that far from improving sanitation and building solidarity, these interactions reinforced upper caste authority. Caste Hindus sanitizing bustees, and instructing the harijans in hygiene, recast their roles as educators of hygiene. Conversely, it portrayed the harijans as inherently dirty. Resisting such stereotypes, many harijans refused to participate in these interactions. For example, when the pracharaks invited the residents of a slum in Tangra to a Durga Puja in the upper caste neighborhoods, they simply refused. They argued that inter-mixing of castes during festivals did not benefit them in any way. Instead, they organized a separate Puja in their bustee.

Failing to instill in the harijans, the codes of Hindu behavior, the pracharaks engaged in building new institutes to tutor the harijans as Hindus. These included new schools for the harijan children. They paid chanda, or subscription to open schools that imparted an education rich in Hindu principles of hygiene. They explained that these schools would instill in the harijan children hygienic habits necessary to build moral character and maintain social order.

As schoolteachers, the pracharaks were always on the lookout for useful ways to drive the students towards Hindu ways of life. This included establishing explicit rules and routines, and training them in that discipline in small amounts everyday. Classes at these schools included lectures on the lives and works of Hindu spiritual leaders. The pracharaks delivered speeches on Hindu deities and read out passages
from Hindu religious texts. They encouraged the students to worship the Hindu poet Tulisdas.\textsuperscript{75} The schools observed a holiday on his birth anniversary. On the birth anniversaries of Hindu deities Krishna and Ganesh, the students performed cultural programs. In many schools, the teachers organized evening classes on hygiene. These classes instructed students in cleanliness conveyed through mythical tales of the Hindu epics Ramayana and Purana.\textsuperscript{76}

The students who attended these schools were children of sweepers and scavengers. Every morning they helped their parents to clean the city. By the time they returned from work, the bustees had run out of water. This meant that when they reached school, dirt still covered their clothes. Without installing new stand posts for water, the pracharaks rebuked the students for their “inherent lack of hygiene”. They explained that as Hindus, they were supposed to wash their bodies and wear clean clothes. They read out passages from the scriptures that described cleanliness and bodily hygiene as central to Hindu religion. Reading out these passages, they examined the eyes, nose, ears, and hands of the students. After school, they visited the houses of the students to supervise the cleaning of their hands and feet.

The bustee schools did not simply instruct harijan children as Hindus, but as Hindu Bengalis. The medium of instruction in these schools was Bengali.\textsuperscript{77} For students who did not speak Bengali, the schools lacked resources. This was a problem in bustees where the residents spoke Urdu.\textsuperscript{78} They informed the pracharaks that their children faced severe difficulties at school and requested them to allow Urdu as the medium of instruction. Rejecting these appeals, the pracharaks refused to agree to any language other than Bengali. In some schools they allowed Hindi to replace Bengali, but Urdu
was out of the question. Furthermore, in schools where they allowed Hindi, they forced students to learn Bengali as the second language.

Other than classroom education, the schools also instructed students in a Hindu physical culture. The teachers encouraged the mental, physical, social, and spiritual growth of the students, arguing that these were the key principles of Hinduism. They invited scoutmasters, Pandit Sheo Nath Shukla and Baijanath Singh from Gujarat, to train the students in the Hindu martial arts: the use bows, arrows, spear, sword, and the lathi.\textsuperscript{79} They explained that the Hindu scriptures inspired the core values of scouting, such as honesty and respect for the others.

In September 1933, enrollment in the bustee schools dropped sharply. The reason was a rumor that circulated among the city’s barbers.\textsuperscript{80} The rumor was that in the name of recruiting students, the pracharaks were abducting and murdering harijan children.\textsuperscript{81} The barbers argued that they had seen pracharaks taking school children to a nearby bridge and pushing them off. By beating drums, they informed bustee dwellers across Calcutta to take their children out of the schools.

When the pracharaks heard about these rumors, they organized awareness raising campaigns to dispel the fear of the barbers. Touring the bustees on their cycles, they advised the barbers to send their children back to the schools. They played the drums and described the good work that they were doing for the barbers. To attract students back to the schools, the pracharaks opened grain stores in the school compounds to sell grains at subsidized rates to the barbers.

The anti- school protests of the barbers showed that the building of institutes did little to curb the feelings of defiance brewing in the bustees. Complaints started to pour
in from different groups of harijans who argued that there should be as many harijans on the executive board as the non-harijans. They also argued that the HSS should devote the main part of its energies and funds to constructive projects like securing the harijans the civic rights of using wells, dharmashalas, opening shops and carrying on other business on equal terms with the caste Hindus.

Part of this critique stemmed from the fact that the shuddhi campaigns failed to address the socio-economic differences that existed within the group “bustee dweller”. The figure of the “bustee dweller” that the campaigns set out to civilize was in fact a jumble of geographic, ethnic, linguistic and religious components. For the pracharaks, what brought it together was the way in which this group stood in contrast to the spatial practices of the affluent upper caste Hindus. With resistance mounting in the bustees, the pracharaks, instead of fixing their campaigns, fell back on their efforts to homogenize the bustee dwellers and control them. A new construct of the black town, seething in filth, rationalized their efforts to categorize all harijan city dwellers as the filthy bustee dweller.

III. Crafting a New Black Town

The harijans provided invaluable service that prepared the city for its daily life. They washed the streets and privies, disposed filth, and worked as construction laborers and refuse cart drivers. Although they disposed filth and made the city habitable, the pracharaks located filth in their bodies and described them as bearers of epidemics. When the harijans protested against the pracharaks, they raised important questions about their role in the city.
Questions about the *harijans* role in the city became all the more intense when the *pracharaks* opened a Cottage Tanning Institute at the Tangra bustee. They recruited seven *chamar* men as workers.\(^{83}\) By this time, the nationalists had called for revitalizing the craft of village tanning. Reformed tanning held promises of bringing carrion eating - a practice common among *harijans* - to an end. This, alongside the revenues it produced, made leather industry an integral part of the national economy. The *pracharaks* argued that in the *bustees*, the tanneries could help transform filth to industry, and also recruit the *harijans* in the work of tanning.

Tanning hides through the day, the *chamars* contributed to the tanning industry in significant ways. The tannery had a small garret for them to sleep in; a kitchen, and all other rooms of the building were used for tanning.\(^{85}\) Although dependent on their labor, the *pracharaks* argued that it was too early to consider them as future citizens.\(^{86}\) Instead, they described the *chamars*, and *harijans*, as “laboring subjects”: bodies disciplined in Hindu codes of conduct that contributed to urban life without demanding the rights of city dwellers.

A new black town, mirroring the earlier colonial construct, underpinned the *pracharaks* depictions of *harijans* as laboring subjects. As the *pracharaks* recruited more *chamars* for the tanneries, they wrote extensively on the conditions of the *chamar bustees*. In these spaces, they located waste, reeking privies overflowing with excreta, and water tanks infested with microbes. The *pracharaks* argued that these spaces were emblematic of *chamar* backwardness. Tightly orchestrated, and carefully scripted, their writings induced a range of reactions - loathing and fear - that transformed *harijan*
bustees into “black towns” and mandated that harijans be trained as laboring subjects, and not citizens.

At the same time, the spatial imaginaries of bustees in the pracharaks writings were steeped in mimesis: a reenactment of the colonial productions of the black town. Similar to the colonial constructions of the black town, the pracharaks described filth and excreta abundant on the bustee streets. Colonial health officers had earlier seized on this filth to break into Bengali houses, sanitize its interiors, and segregate the residents as unclean. The pracharaks departed from such practices in locating filth not in Bengali houses, but in harijan bustees.

In 1934, Narainadas Rattanmal Malkani, a member of the Swarajya party, toured the scavenger bustees of Benares. In these bustees, he observed mud huts violating building regulations.\(^{87}\) He saw “sickly dwellers covered in filth” walking the streets, unguarded. The filth that covered their bodies troubled him: “dirty and diseased”, these scavengers were at the heart of his descriptions of the bustees. He argued that practicing obsolete methods of refuse disposal, they embodied the filth of the bustees. They carried bamboo crates full of excreta on their heads, while their carts brimmed with liquid filth that let out noxious gases. He wrote that the scavengers “did not mind putting their hand into drums of night-soil” or “carry the leaking crates of liquid excreta on their head”.\(^ {88}\) By the end of his tour, Malkani pointed out that “the bhangi (scavengers) caste plague society not in one, but multiple ways”.\(^ {89}\) Similar to colonial surveys, he warned that filth and disease were typical to scavenger bustees.

Malkani’s work informed the pracharaks surveys in Calcutta and shaped the early contours of the black town. Similar to Malkani, Satish Dasgupta’s writings in the
journal Harijans carried striking portrayals of filth in the harijan bustees. His writings were in fact efforts to inform upper caste Hindus about the dismal conditions in the harijan bustees. Caste Hindu councilors in Bengal had earlier argued that untouchability did not exist in the region. For this reason, they refused to accept the Poona Pact. Dasgupta condemned this “regrettable mentality of the caste Hindu councilors” arguing “untouchability is a greater curse in Bengal than in Madras”. 90

Following from this, Dasgupta camped in the bustees and invented new ways to observe, perceive, and intervene in the lives of its residents. Offering details of the hardships of the bustee dwellers, his writings also essentialized harijan bustees as topographies of waste. He described slum streets heaped in filth, and huts with “broken window-panes stuffed with stinking rags, and a fetid smell overpowering human senses”. 91 He observed scavengers “living like animals amidst shit and filth that covered the beds, tables, and kitchen corners, not to mention the pests that ate out of the plates”. 92 Far from describing these instances as extraordinary, he argued that these represented the general picture of unhygiene that plagued the neighborhoods of the harijans.

Dasgupta’s writings, similar to colonial health surveys, differentiated between the clean and the dirty, the orderly and disorderly: the “us” and “them”. He described slum dwellers as “filthy beasts and savages” who “living in the bustees lost the sense that they were human beings”. 93 As his writings show, racial markers were not the only factors that held back the bustee dwellers right to the city. Instead, proximity to waste molded their identities, and marked them as groups outside the civilized space of
society. In the pracharak’s writings, the harijans, either by sitting in their own waste, or by littering the city, threatened the modern order of the city.

This modern order of the city, in turn, mandated the production of the bustee as the “other” to naturalize it. It required the construction of certain city dwellers as if they existed prior to the growth of the city, and were therefore, different. The pracharak\*s employed this difference as the discursive tool to produce and maintain the hegemony of idyllic city space: the para. The more the pracharak\*s naturalized the otherness of the bustees, the more their paras enjoyed a subtle, elusive hegemony. They explained that the para dwellers ability to separate themselves from garbage, to expel it, was the marker of their modernity. In sharp contrast, the bustee dwellers proximity to garbage marked their otherness, and turned their bustees into the black town.

Key to the pracharak discourses of filth-ridden bustees was the figure of the “ignorant and deplorable” bustee dwellers, incapable of controlling their environs. These descriptions showed that the bustee dwellers, sitting in filth, were also incapable of self-government. Dasgupta described Chamaru, a refuse cart driver, incapable of controlling the filth that accumulated in his hut.⁹⁴ He showed that the narrow lane leading to Chamaru’s hut was always covered in excreta. The hut itself was a “dark box room” that lacked sunlight and fresh air. To make matters worse, the bustee did not have a steady supply of water. Chamaru did not approach the Corporation for new water stand posts. Instead, he fetched water from stand posts in a different bustee. He used this water for drinking, cleaning utensils, and washing his clothes. This meant that the water often proved insufficient to meet his needs. For that reason, filth continued to accumulate in his hut and also the streets adjoining it.
The *pracharaks* working with Dasgupta argued that Chamaru was not much concerned with the insanitary condition of his *bustee*. They argued that this was because he lacked the knowledge of hygiene. They then explained that *shuddhi* campaigns would dispel the “deplorable ignorance of the *bustee* people like Chamaru about sanitation”.95 This reached new heights with the “apron campaign” that they launched against the municipal corporation.96 They argued that the Calcutta Municipal Corporation cared little for its *harijan* employees. When the scavengers sanitized privies, human excreta soiled their clothes. They returned to their *bustees* to find that the water had run out. The *pracharaks* argued that civic amenities in the *bustees* being inadequate, the Corporation should provide the scavengers with aprons. But at the same time, they explained that the scavengers for so long had not made this demand, which showed that the lacked the basic awareness of hygiene.

In crafting the new black town, the association of the *harijans* and filth went hand in hand with the *pracharaks* growing concern for public health. Until the early twentieth century, the emerging discipline of public health had relied primarily on emergency measures, such as isolation of the infected city dwellers. The state considered its success in eliminating periodic outbreaks of epidemics as a triumph of technological and scientific innovation. The *pracharaks*, on the other hand, saw in public health an effective way to persuade the *harijans* to cede authority in them in matters of sanitation. To this end, they argued that the spatial practices of the *harijans* carried on their lifestyles in the villages, and was incompatible to the city. The *harijans* should therefore accept the *pracharaks* as instructors of hygiene.
In an article titled “The Denizens of Hell”, Dasgupta argued that most harijans had migrated from the villages and lacked the expertise to clean their huts in the city. At the center of this article stood Ramkhelan Dosad, a scavenger, who had moved to Calcutta from Bihar.97 Dasgupta described that he lived in a small hut in a bustee that lacked water and modern privies. Human and animal excreta littered the streets adjoining his hut. Dosad did not clean the streets, and soon fell sick and went back to his village. He later died in his village. When his brother Birju came to the city to inform Dosad’s wife about his death, he felt like a “strange fish out of water”: the filth-strewn streets and the stench in the air forced him to return to his village as early as possible.

As Pyarelal Nayyar, Gandhi’s secretary wrote, the stench of the bustees did not simply trouble the harijans, but deteriorated the health of the city. He cited British medical authorities who argued that the stagnant pools in the bustees made “people eat, breathe, and drink infection”.98 Following these medical officers, he warned that the mud huts of the bustee dwellers had pits or tanks that were receptacles of filth. The bustee dwellers, he argued, cared little about the noxious gases that hovered above these pits. This indifference, he believed could prove fatal for the rest of the city and warranted the interventions of the pracharaks.

Consequently, the new geography of the black town brought public health out of the purview of the state and invested it in the bhadraloks. The bhadraloks argued they would manage health in the bustees adjoining their para, and that state intervention was not necessary. Para clubs, such as Ramkrishna Sangha and Palli Sri Sangha worked with the pracharaks in the spatial shuddhi campaigns.99
The *shuddhi* campaigns also cleared the road for the city’s business interests, who financed many of the improvements and dictated the processes of *shuddhi.*\(^{100}\) With the authority and objectivity of science, they urged *bustee* dwellers - aberrant or unfit - to cure themselves and contribute to national labor. The leading entrepreneur G. D. Birla, for instance, established schools, temples, huts, and *dharmashalas* for the *harijan* workers. He wrote that the Marwari entrepreneurs were working hard to improve *bustees* across Calcutta.\(^{101}\) He took the then mayor of Calcutta Bidhan Chandra Roy, on a guided tour of the *bustees*. He listed nearly six hundred *bustees*, and argued that he had successfully improved two hundred of these.\(^{102}\) These now had electricity, water, and modern sewers. But the remaining four hundred were still without civic amenities. He explained that nothing less than the Corporation intervention could improve these spaces. Roy, however, informed Birla that he was helpless, his own bureaucracy was hostile, and funds were insufficient to carry out improvements.\(^{103}\)

With the mayor refusing to assist, Birla and the other entrepreneurs intervened in the *bustees* with renewed forces. Vasantalal Morarka, another Marwari businessman, advised the *pracharaks* to resolve problems of drinking water and public health, while carrying out propaganda against meat eating.\(^{104}\) Under his supervision, the *pracharaks* reached the most remote parts of the city: they opened schools in the *mehter* (scavenger) and *dome* (crematorium workers) *bustees* of Haribagan; in Dhangarpara *bustee* of Narkeldanga, they opened four water taps and also built new privies.\(^{105}\)

As these interventions show, at the core of spatial *shuddhi* was a process of othering: a dualistic process of differentiation that separated “us” and “them” and through it, established and maintained social distance. As a discursive practice, othering
shaped how the upper castes talked about and acted towards harijans at an interpersonal level. The “othering” of the harijans also meant that they were typically targets of the upper caste’s pity or indifference and, at times, their fear, contempt or hostility, to be helped or punished, ignored or studied but rarely treated as equal fellow citizens with rights.

IV. Conclusion

As I have argued, with colonialism, bustees became a linguistic tool to represent filth and waste ridden geographies of Calcutta. Initially, in colonial health reports, it was a ubiquitous term to mean Bengali neighborhoods in general. This changed with the Swarajist municipal administration that traced the modern origins of bustees. The cycle pracharaks, working with the HSS, later exerted a level of autonomy in remolding the space of the bustee. In their discourses on the bustee, they aligned the term with stereotypical notions of filth in harijan neighborhoods. To this end, it became a term of intense caste-based disgust. Routinely demonized in the pracharak surveys, the level of disgust mobilized by the figure of the bustee dweller suggested heightened caste antagonism that, in turn, recast the bhadralok government of hygiene.

As pracharaks, the bhadraloks represented the space of harijan neighborhoods in ways that sharpened caste disgust. In these representations, descriptions of filth-ridden bustees displayed the lower castes as the sullied urban underclass. Spatial shuddhi, while promising to sanitize space, produced filth, redrawing the boundaries between respectable and non-respectable city dwellers. Similar to earlier colonial constructions of “filthy” Bengalis, bhadraloks invoked the same metaphors of filth,
disease, and ignorance, to differentiate their “respectable Bengaliness” from that of the lower castes.

Spatial *shuddhi* also barred citizenship from evolving as a participatory practice. The *pracharak* offered a kinetic commentary on filth to argue that the *bustee* dwellers were far too uncivilized to enjoy equal rights to the city. They then crafted the spatial *shuddhi* to train *bustee* dwellers as Hindu “laboring subjects”. As the *shuddhi* campaigns reveal, the reformatting of the *bustee* dwellers did not take place through the guarantee of broad civil rights - entry into public places, and use of public facilities - under the *bustee* dwellers themselves. Instead, it took shape under strict *bhadralok* directives that tried to standardize Hindu codes of conduct as behavior fit for the city. Urbanity in this respect was a misnomer; representations of *bustee* dwellers facilitated the triumphant assertion of *bhadralok* leadership in the city.
1 Report of the Commissioners Appointed in Inquire into the Sanitation of Calcutta (1885), 4th meeting, 26 September 1884, p. iv.

2 The Dawn and Dawn Society's Magazine IV, no. 1 (September 1907): 146.


6 See Zeynep Celik, Urban forms and colonial confrontations Algiers under French rule. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Celik echoes Homi Bhabha’s observation that the colonial relationship, which contributed to the development of possible subjectivities among the colonized and former colonized even after the colonial encounter, is not symmetrically antagonistic.

7 I use “harijan” as the bhadraloks used this term in their writings to mean the lower castes. A more appropriate term would definitely be the “dalit”, but in using “harijan” I am trying to preserve the understandings of the bhadralok and the group that they were referring to.

8 Members of the Swarajya Party that endorsed ideas of self-government.

9 Calcutta in this chapter, is the same territory I defined in the Chapter 3.

10 Harijan (July 15, 1933)


13 Harijan (June 10, 1933)

14 Report on the vital statistics and sanitary condition of Calcutta (Calcutta: Corp. of Calcutta, 1876).

15 Bengal public health report (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1885).


17 Svasthya Samacara, XVI, 113.


19 David Douglas Cunngham, Plagues and Pleasures of Life in Bengal. (J.Murray, 1907), 23.

20 Cholera in Calcutta in 1894 and anti-choleraic inoculation, 55.

21 Svasthya Samacara, XVI, 112.

22 Report of the commissioners appointed to inquire into the sanitary state of the army in India, (London, Eyre, 1863), 28-29.

23 Instructions for conducting an enquiry into cholera in India. (Harrison for H.M.S.O., 1869), 34.


30 The Times of India. July 05, 1928.

31 Ibid

32 The Times of India. October 02, 1928.
33 Hemendranath, Dasgupta. *Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das*. (Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, 1960), 120.

34 *The Times of India*. August 18, 1929.

35 Janayuddha. (August 5, 1942).

36 Janayuddha. October 9, 1942.

37 *The Times of India*. September 6, 1929.

38 Ibid


41 *Harijan*, (June 12, 1933)


43 *Harijan* (March 16, 1934)

44 *Harijan* (April 2, 1933)

45 *Harijan* (June 22, 1934)

46 *Harijan* (July 29, 1933)

47 *Harijan* (December 2, 1933)

48 *Harijan* (November 2, 1936)

49 *Harijan* (June 29, 1934)

50 *Harijan* (March 18, 1933)

51 *Harijan* (January 26, 1934).

52 *Harijan* (April 12, 1933).


54 *Harijan* (May 16, 1936)

55 *Harijan* (August 19, 1933)

56 *Harijan* (December 21, 1933)

57 *Harijan* (June 13, 1936)

58 Ibid


60 *The Statesman*. April 04, 1936.

61 *Harijan* (April 29, 1933).

62 Ibid


64 *Harijan* (November 11, 1937)

65 *Harijan* (May 20, 1933).

66 Ibid

67 Ibid

68 Ibid

69 *The Times of India*. May 03, 1933.

70 *Calcutta Municipal Gazette* (November 12, 1936)

71 *Calcutta Municipal gazette* (March 12, 1926)

72 *Harijan* (August 21, 1938).

73 *The Times of India*. April 23, 1938

74 *Harijan* (June 02, 1937)

75 Ibid

76 *Harijan* (December 5, 1936).


78 *Calcutta Municipal Gazette* (November 29, 1934).


80 Ibid
Leather workers, usually lower caste.

The Times of India. April 06, 1935.

Harijans (May 11, 1935).

Annual Report of the Harijan Sevak Sangh. (Delhi, October 1934-September 1935).

Naraindas Rattanmal Malkani, Clean People and an Unclean country. (Delhi: Harijan Sevak Sangh 1965), 32-35.

Malkani, 37.

Malkani, 56.

Harijan (March 18, 1933).

Harijan (April 9, 1934).

Ibid

Harijan (August 12, 1933)

Harijan (August 19, 1933).

Harijan (April 12, 1933)

Harijan (March 18, 1933)

Harijan (August 12, 1933).

Harijan (August 8, 1936)

Harijan (May 2, 1935).

The Times of India. April 6, 1935


Ibid


Harijan (February 18, 1933)

Harijan (March 04, 1933)
Conclusion

All through the early twentieth century, street sweepers in Calcutta woke up before dawn, left their bustees, walked to the city’s main avenues and scrubbed these clean. Working in small armies, they pushed their refuse carts up the streets, shoveling garbage and flushing refuse. Collecting filth from the street sides, they carried these to proper centers for disposal. Their work made the city livable, and ready for daily life. Yet, when the sweepers had swept the streets clean, they quickly went back to their bustees, dispersing before daybreak.

The bhadraloks considered even the sight of these sweepers polluting. They took every step to make sure their daily lives did not intersect with the “foul bodies” of these lower-caste sweepers. Living in neighborhoods away from the sweepers, they invented new ways to deny them entry to the public spaces of the city.

This segregation of space into caste enclaves captures the uniqueness of the urban experience in colonial Calcutta. As this dissertation has shown, the metaphoring of filth was central to this experience. I have argued that this metaphoring took place with an eye to generate certain reactions, social outlooks, and judgments that targeted certain sections of society. As chapter 1 has shown, health officers inscribed filth with new meanings linking it to the habits of Indians and transforming their neighborhoods into dens of disease. Chapter 4 shows urban middle class Bengalis appropriating the colonial metaphors of filth for very different purposes. Tracing filth to the lower castes, they employed these metaphors to rationalize oppressive schemes of segregation and control of the lower castes.
In the late nineteenth century, colonial health officers had begun to draw attention to the role of filth in spreading disease. Their reports were instrumental in linking dirt to Indian houses, holding these responsible for deteriorating the epidemic constitution of the city. Even with the notion of germs becoming commonplace, their reports endorsed a different understanding of hygiene: these drove to prevent epidemics by eliminating filth in the Indian neighborhoods.

By the early twentieth century, public health movements to control infectious diseases had become common in countries outside India. In North America, disease control saw the discovery of antibiotics and a surge in vaccination programs. Likewise, public health measures in Europe included provisions for clean water, and the creation of a public bath movement to instruct the poor on the benefits of cleanliness. Each of these discoveries marked scientific and technologic advances that built the foundations of present-day medical surveillance and control systems.

In contrast, in India, public health reforms furthered colonial ambitions of domination and control. This was implicit in the town improvements that the state commissioned to improve public health in the city. As Chapter 1 shows, the spatial binaries of white/black town went beyond extending the economic and political domination of the colonizing society, and worked to authenticate the British as hygienic and civilized. Taking pride in their superior “civilization”, they set the standards of hygiene in Calcutta. With this, they justified their rule in India as a mission to civilize the people by instructing them in hygiene.
Colonial instructions in hygiene reinforced the cultural association between whiteness and cleanliness. The state proposed a single standard of hygiene that failed to take into account the multitude of concerns that informed spatial practices in Calcutta. For instance, the new improvements did not have provisions for caste and religious differences. For the Indians, this was particularly problematic, as they had to suspend their caste and religious practices to access even the basic civic facilities: drinking water, sewers, waste disposal, housing, and health care.

Well aware of this predicament, colonial improvement commissioners, however, did not try to solve it. While initiating new improvements, they realized that those improvements that did not take into account caste practices had little value for the Indians. At first, they tried to school the Indians on the benefits of these improvements, but remained unsuccessful. On the other hand, as long as these improvements opened up Indian neighborhoods for surveillance, they made little effort to alter these to match Indian needs. They argued that although these improvements violated caste and religious practices, only these could civilize the Indians.

Unfortunately, in this oppressive climate, even strict adherence to the new standards of hygiene did not free Indians from the stigma of being filthy; as Chapter 2 pointed out, in the early twentieth century, improvement committees demolished houses with the goal of evicting Indians from the centrally located parts of the city. In such efforts, the colonial construct of the “black town” as the hub of disease facilitated authoritarian schemes of regulation and demolition.

In fact, we can situate the current power imbalances and knowledge hierarchy of developmentalism in the colonial dyad of white/black town. Conceptualized as a set of
epistemic/ideological systems, with the global (mostly western) knowledge at the top and the local (local or regional) knowledge at the bottom, developmentalism works through the production of binaries similar to the colonial crafting of the white/black towns that enfolded the categories of civilized/uncivilized. Similar to the colonial ideas of town improvement, the global knowledge of development (urban and economic growth), in the form of the neo-liberal paradigm, claims universal applicability. It declares the efficacy of free markets to maximize economic growth and reduce poverty. When the local fails to match up, the global knowledge describes it as a failure of policy and advocates the need to open economies to the influence of global market forces. It also traces in this failure a “backward” government and calls for a new government that is more democratic, transparent, efficient and non-corrupt: in a word, more western.

In such proclamations, the authors of global knowledge pay little regard to historical records that show the failure of planting ideas and practices on different cultural landscapes. Instead, they describe a single strand of development applicable to all landscapes. This idea of universal applicability conditions the ways in which they view the world and the policies that they follow, even when empirical evidence points to the contrary.

II

I have argued that the colonial city was not simply the space of colonialism but also embodied a dense history of appropriation of colonial forces. As Chapters 2 and 3 show, by the early twentieth century, bhadraloks shared with the state concerns of public health. I have suggested that this zealous adherence of the bhadraloks to hygiene was indeed part of their efforts to craft new identities in the city. To this end, their
commitments to cleanliness and hygiene marked them as different from other city dwellers.

This obsession with hygiene transformed bhadraloks into urban sanitarians and informed their management of space. They invented a new code of Hindu spatial hygiene, which became the basis of their autonomous government in the para. Their efforts in the para remained mostly pedagogic. Besides cleanliness of space, they promoted new norms of good behavior. One primary goal in their management of the para was their effort to educate the para through clinics, medical publications, and health associations. They headed these institutes, which initiated new programs to school the para in conduct fit for the city. These efforts of the bhadraloks in the para were different from that of the Swarajists and nationalists.

I have pointed out in Chapters 3 and 4 that in the sanitation campaigns led by the bhadraloks, ideas of development manifested as interventions in conduct. These included a wide variety of bodily practices such as fitness, exercise, and diet alongside codes of appropriate speech, and conduct. This, in turn, extended bhadralok authority to all aspects of personal, and public life. They recruited men from the para to oversee and reform the hygienic habits of their neighbors. “Watching over” the health of their neighbors, these men also advised the para on matters other than hygiene, such as property, marriage, and religion.

Chapter 3 also shows that the entrenchment of the bhadralok social rule echoed in several other aspects of urban life: it configured new identities, including those of women and children. Women in fact played an important role in complementing bhadralok government of hygiene. Their domestic roles, nurturing and improving the
health of their families were central to enforcing the “bhadralok values” of personal and domestic hygiene. Centering the figure of the women, took shape ideas of domestic hygiene. Based on assumptions that women could implement the ideas of hygiene in their family, the bhadraloks defined the category of the bhadramahila.

Bhadralok obsession with hygiene also informed the identities of children, training them as future bhadraloks. In routines of physical exercises at the park and the scout training camps, bhadraloks deployed hygiene to school young boys in bhadra etiquettes. Their scout camps instructed the boys to follow orders and improve their physical strength. These instructions were couched in medical, social, and political terms: children were taught to exercise and behave in particular ways because it was good for their bodies, created social order, and also because the bhadraloks said so. This association between schooling and cleaning was so well established in the bhadralok government that it extended their authority to every aspect of everyday life.

Upholding cleanliness and hygiene, the bhadralok government also emphasized the need to improve social fitness of the para. This meant that they did not simply condemn filth for spreading disease, but also offered a critique of “filthy” bodies for infecting the moral health of the para. This, in turn, sustained bhadralok discriminations against the lower castes and public women, whom they transformed into exact opposites of bhadra: the abhadra.

At the same time, new ideas of respectability resulted in the bhadralok redrawing of boundaries of the para. As Chapter 4 shows, bhadraloks actively managed urban space to display the divides between bhadra and abhadra city dwellers. To this end, they invaded the bustees of the lower castes and tried to school its “unclean” and
“corrupt” residents in Hindu hygiene. In such efforts, they subjected the lower castes to the same discipline that the colonial state had earlier enforced upon them. By the 1930s, bhadraloks had entered the bustees adjoining their paras and used hygiene as the code to translate its inhabitants as “undesirable” population.

In the early twentieth century, the bhadralok obsession with hygiene mirrored similar efforts of the English middle classes, but also departed from it in significant ways. Similar to Calcutta, epidemics had ravaged London at the turn of the twentieth century. The state had responded by building sewers, sanitizing the city, and publishing literature on ways to maintain good health. At the same time, the English middle classes transformed their manners, increasingly emphasizing bodily hygiene, restraint, and self-control. They developed new rules of etiquette that required restriction of public spitting, use of handkerchiefs, and strict toilet practices. At the turn of the century, these “manners” of the English middle classes distinguished them from the common and “offensive” lower classes.

To some degree, bhadralok interventions in the bustees was also similar to the Americanization movement of North America where reformers used instructions in hygiene to convert European working-class immigrants into Americans. In this movement, maintenance of social order was contingent on the maintenance of high standards of hygiene, based on the manners of the Americans.

Likewise, the shuddhi campaigns that the bhadraloks led in the bustees, described Hindu standards as ideal in the city. This mandated that the lower castes and harijans give up their practices, which was often a mix of Hindu and Islamic practices, to follow only Hindu spatial practices.
Nevertheless, unlike cities in Europe and North America, goals of colonialism matched the Bengali demands for autonomy to overwrite the norms of spatial hygiene in Calcutta. While improvement commissioners argued that the sewers and filtered water supply could civilize the city, bhadraloks resisted these improvements by inventing new standards of Hindu hygiene. Inscribing hygiene with different meaning, they argued that their “civilization” was very different from that of the British. They described hygiene and cleanliness as their “virtue”, an asset unique to them, while also drawing on Hindu religion to mark their hygiene as different from what the state preached.

These assertions facilitated the meteoric rise of the bhadraloks as pioneers of Hindu hygiene in Calcutta. Their houses, bodies, speech, and lifestyles reflected their cleanliness and reconfigured the spaces of their para. This also called for the separation of their para from the adjoining bustees of the lower castes.

At the same time, bhadralok clubs in the para were very different from the voluntary associations that dotted the cultural landscape of late nineteenth century Calcutta. In the 1870s, voluntary associations of bhadraloks were centers of cultural diffusion. Meeting to discuss literature, arts, and music, they also formed “political clubs” that, as Christine Furedy has argued, were modeled after political associations of Britain to influence legislation. Unlike these voluntary associations, bhadralok clubs in the para did not seek to influence state legislations. Instead these functioned as the nerve center of an autonomous government in the para, independent of the state. As Chapter 3 argues, discussions of literature and music at the para clubs reinforced the kin like ties of the bhadraloks and facilitated their social rule.
Holding together the kin like ties of the *para*, these clubs were far from the space of civil society. Ideally, the civil society is the non-state voluntary organization formed by people who have power to influence the state. It includes a wide range of organizations, networks, associations, groups, and movements independent of the state that come together to advance their common interests through collective action. In that sense, civil society provides a way for the people to cope with a larger, more bureaucratized society. It provides people with power within the impersonal structures of modern society: the government and corporate business. By bringing together the people on a relatively local scale, civil society then allows ordinary men and women to voice and solve their common problems. In studies of European civil societies, this concept is therefore coupled with the idea of popular democracy.\(^9\) Scholars have described voluntary associations, ranging from communes to neighborhood associations as harbingers of democratic transitions.

Although clubs brought together ordinary people of the *para* to advance common interests, these were far from democratic spaces. These clubs did not offer a social space between the family and the state; instead, rooted in kin like ties it formed an alternative to the state. The association of bhadraloks in the clubs, rather than facilitating the democratic transition of the *para*, configured it to underpin their growing authority. In such efforts, their meetings at the club resisted state intervention while also forcing the *para* dwellers to behave in certain ways.

During the last few years, international organizations, such as the World Bank and the United Nations have actively promoted the idea of civil society as a development tool for “third world” societies. They have argued that these countries do
not have experience of freedom, democracy, or economic wellbeing, and civil societies can usher in democratic transitions. These organizations therefore see the emergence of civil society as a mechanism to counterbalance the autocracy that reigns in these “traditional” societies. Yet, empirical evidence show that in these countries a very different historical condition had brought together associations of people with common interests. Within the framework of colonialism, their aspirations, however, remained very different, and their methods far from democratic. More than democratic transitions, the goals of these associations were driven towards trying to adapt to changes – urban, economic, and cultural – that colonialism had forced on them. In these efforts, the associations crafted new identities through means that were not always democratic. These new identities, nevertheless, helped the people to survive the colonial city and its discipline(s).

III

To examine the crafting of new identities, this dissertation has moved beyond the study of structures to focus on everyday life in the city. Both social history and postcolonial scholarship on South Asian cities describe urbanization as a structural intervention. Exploring maps and town plans, scholars have analyzed streets, buildings, and facades to describe an urbanity rooted in physical space. Scholarship that describes the city as a socio-spatial configuration is surprisingly absent, which means that histories of South Asian cities have little to say on the role of the people in crafting their environment. This dissertation has addressed this gap. Going beyond nationalist spatial imaginations, I have focused on the ways in which people with very little access to municipal powers shaped their city.
One of my main goals in writing this dissertation was to understand the ways in which identities are rooted in space, and the ways in which everyday life in the city shape these identities. To that end, I have explored the tactics that the people employed in their everyday life to craft new identities and resist the city-making efforts of the state. These tactics often did not overlap the nationalist spatial imaginations of the city nation, or the city that furthered the interests of the nation. As I have argued, upholding “middle class values of spatial hygiene” bhadralok efforts contrasted the nationalist ideas of cohesion in envisioning the city.

Chapters 3 and 4, offer a view of urbanism that took shape in the everyday spaces of the city, beyond nationalist mediation. I have argued that in these spaces, the bhadraloks employed a Hindu identity as their everyday tactics to resist the state, and also mark their rise as pioneers of spatial hygiene. As I have described, their efforts in crafting this identity were their attempts to inhabit a city that failed to preserve caste and religious differences of city dwellers. Responding to this, the bhadraloks crafted new identities that were reflexive, and stratified the city along caste lines. In such efforts they did not seek nationalist intervention, nor contribute to the nationalist ambitions of shaping a Hindu nation.

In sum, the study of the everyday in this dissertation makes two major contributions. First, while existing scholarship focuses on structures, ideals, and organizations, this dissertation points to practices and experiences of everyday life. This allows my study to go beyond surveying municipal authorities, nationalists, and town planners, and instead narrate the hidden stories of the city, that is, the urban experiences of the people. Then again, Calcutta’s urban transitions took place in the backdrop of
colonialism; I have therefore explored an everyday that took shape in the shadow of colonialism. This, in turn, transforms the *para* into a lens to understand how broader historical forces played out in the everyday spaces of the city.

Second, this dissertation shows new spaces, social organizations, associations, and exchanges between people that only the study of the everyday can reveal. I have pointed to new forms of power, social and moral disciplines, and redefinitions of the public and private that informed everyday life in colonial Calcutta, and remain relevant till date. Most importantly, *paras* as autonomous communities with every aspect of self-rule took shape much before India achieved formal independence, and continue to remain sovereign units till today.
For instance, James Keith Colgrove, *State of immunity: the politics of vaccination in twentieth-century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 30. Colgrove shows the trajectory through which vaccination became central to public health measures while also becoming enmeshed in a series of legal and ethical questions.


By developmentalism, I am once again referring to what Arutro Escobar has described as a process of othering. Development, as Escobar argues is the ideology that keeps alive the hierarchy of countries, producing mechanisms of control. Arutro Escobar, *Encountering development: the making and unmaking of the Third World*, (Princeton, N.J Princeton University Press, 1995).

4 By planting, I mean what I have explained earlier as “grafting”, that is, forcing improvements that do not necessarily match the rhythms of cultural geography.


6 Ibid, 92.


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