Book Review

Ranjit Sen, *Birth of a Colonial City: Calcutta* **(London and New York: Routledge, 2019).**

Ranjit Sen, *Calcutta in Colonial Transition* **(London and New York: Routledge, 2019).**

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In 1985, Ranjit Sen published a slim book consisting of three chapters on the history of eighteenth century Calcutta. He focused on the development of the city, its population, and the role of the *banians* in urbanization of Calcutta. Fifteen years later, in 2000, he came out with another book—*A Stagnating City*—where he put forward his argument on eighteenth century Calcutta on a much wider scale. He has shown that the growth and development of Calcutta in post-Plassey period was an outcome of haphazard measures without any consistent town planning initiatives. Following this line of argument, and extending his focus beyond the eighteenth century, Ranjit Sen has recently published a two-volume biography of colonial Calcutta. The books are *Birth of a Colonial Town* and *Calcutta in Colonial Transition*. The two books cover a period from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. There are quite a few interesting themes in these books. I will take up a few issues discussed in these volumes to look at the way Sen has delineated the history of Calcutta. I will quote relevant portions from his own writings to get a sense of his historical observations and analyses.

<u>Geopolitics:</u> Regarding the spatial location of Calcutta Sen has provided us with some important insights. Taking cue from geopolitical theory, he has tried to understand why an unhealthy, marshy spot on the coast of Bay of Bengal was selected as the place for Company's garrison. While writing the history Calcutta, scholars often remain confined within the territory of the city itself, without looking at the wider political and geographic realm. Sen's discussion of the geopolitics of the early urbanization of Calcutta gives us new insights about the history of the city. The English wanted a place where the Nawab of Bengal would not interfere much. They opted for Calcutta on the other bank of the river, opposite the *nawabi* settlement at Hughli. Sen mentions,

> The geopolitics of Calcutta's urbanization was determined by two things: the situation around Calcutta of the *faujdaries* of Chitpur, Hughli, Murshidabad, Malda, Balasore, and Rajmahal on the one hand, and close vigilance imposed by the *Nawabs* of Bengal on the activities of the English Company in this part of the country on the other. The *Nawabs* maintained two watch-posts on Calcutta – one was the *faujdari* at Chitpur adjacent to Calcutta on land on the same bank of the river as Calcutta was situated, and the other

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was at Hughli on the west bank of the river at a site almost opposite of Calcutta that was easily communicable by river. The result was that the English in Calcutta was almost quarantined. (Sen, *Birth of a Colonial City*, pp. 63-64)

Apart from the Nawab, the English wanted to secure their trade from other European rival companies as well. Thus the Company was eager to build a fort at Calcutta from the beginning. The nawab did not approve this zeal for fortification. We must keep in mind that during the eighteenth century fortification or minting coins by any foreign trading company was seen as sign of sovereign power. Thus the nawab was ill at ease with any kind of construction by the English company. Sen opines that this conflict regarding construction of buildings thwarted the urbanization process during the first half of the eighteenth century in Calcutta. The conflicts with the Mughals between 1686 and 1690, the revolt of Shobha Singh in 1696-98 and the constant tussle with the Bengal *nawab* about the use of *dastak* forced the Company to keep Calcutta as a secured base for their activities. At the same time they were also trying to create a foothold in other places of Bengal. But that was not possible keeping the *nawab* in the dark. This dialectical relationship between the Company and the *nawab* shaped the fortune of Calcutta. Sen writes,

> The reciprocal fear of each other's activities had been the most abiding factor in shaping the relation between the Company and the country government throughout the first half of the eighteenth century. Fearful of the English might and their intentions, the *nawabs* seemed to be cautious in allowing the English to proceed deep into the countryside. As a result the English were disturbed that their district stations were not in the shape they were expected to be. (Sen, *Birth of a Colonial City*, p. 68)

The Company did not pay much attention to a systematic development of Calcutta as it was busy dealing with the Bengal rulers. But with Siraj's defeat, Calcutta's fortune changed. Murshidabad gradually declined, and with the grant of diwani to the Company in 1765, Calcutta got a fillip. Sen concludes, "The centre of gravity in the geopolitics of the region had shifted from Murshidabad to Calcutta. The age was now ushered in for proper foundation of a colonial city in Calcutta." (Sen, *Birth of a Colonial City*, p. 70)

Calcutta as the Centre of Power: After Plassey, Buxar, and *diwani*, Calcutta changed rapidly. Starting from Warren Hastings to William Bentinck, successive English rulers were keen to establish Calcutta as their capital. During this period, Calcutta started to make its mark on the political scene of Bengal. According to Sen, British supremacy in Calcutta was first manifested at the time of the hanging of Maharaja Nandakumar. Later-day historians have opined that he was wrongfully adjudicated in false charges. With the creation of the post of Governor-General by the Regulating Act of 1773 and the establishment of the Supreme Court, the administration of law and order in the city altered in a massive way. During Hastings' time, the Company gained economically from Bengal. Also, a great sum was acquired from the raja of Benaras, Chait Singh. Sen has mentioned that, "The point we stress is that, through his dealings, in the cases of Maharaja Nanda Kumar as well as Chait Singh, Hastings was demonstrating a show of power which scared the native people in Calcutta and around, and this fear and its memory provided a barrier to the unity between the ruler and the ruled in years to come." (Sen, *Birth of a Colonial City*, p. 146)

From this time onwards, the older towns of Bengal started to decline. Mir Jafar and the later nawabs were forced to look towards Calcutta for any decision. The main administrative offices were transferred from Murshidabad to Calcutta. The regional elites also started to settle in Calcutta. As a result, the city went on expanding. There was very little similarity with Mughal or nawabi towns though. The division between black and white towns brought in a new feature in Indian urbanization. This town morphology revealed the political power of the foreign trading company. Senwrites,

> From the beginning it was clear that the city was not to go the way of a Mughal city. A Mughal city had no racial compartments. But, in the new city, the settlement of the whites was developed in contradistinction to the settlement of the brown people. From Govindpur and Calcutta, natives were gradually driven to the north to Sutanuti and its beyond. The fort and its immediate neighbourhood became the nucleus of a white city. A port and a garrison town were now to be merged and on the basis of this merger the seat of a new power was to be erected. (Sen, *Birth of a Colonial City*, p. 154)

In this way, colonial urbanization process took shape in the post-Plassey period in Bengal. There may not have been any conscious town planning initiatives in the eighteenth century, but there is no doubt that a new process was inaugurated in place of the older system.

Trade, Business, and Urbanization of Calcutta: From the late eighteenth century and during the nineteenth century, trade and business relations had major impact on the urbanization of Calcutta. The activities of the agency houses created a huge infrastructure with their base at Calcutta. Bengali businessmen like Ramdulal De and Dwarkanath Tagore ventured into various business enterprises during the first half of the nineteenth century. These Bengali capitalists took advantage of the free-trade ideology prevalent at that time in England. Utilitarian and Liberal thinkers had major impact on the administration of India during this period. According to Sen, "there emerged a school of thought in England who wanted to promote India's solvency, if not its affluence. India's solvency would come not alone from territorial revenue extracted from moribund peasant economy, not even from trade in which India was experiencing a losing balance, but from industry." (Sen, *Calcutta in Colonial Transition*, p. 151)

There were two important factors for the development of industry in Bengal: a) the emergence of a capitalist class in Calcutta, and b) the urge of the British empire to earn money apart from land revenue. During the period of Bentinck, a disciple of Jeremy Bentham, there was much effort in this regard. But in 1830s-40s with the decline of the agency houses and the fall of the Union Bank, rapid changes occurred in the business scene of Calcutta. Bengali entrepreneurs thought that investing in land instead of commercial ventures was a much more secured option. Senwrites with great regret that, "An intellectually renascent society became economically decadent. This paradigm of economic decadence henceforth became a lasting feature in Bengal's economy." (Sen, *Calcutta in Colonial Transition*, p. 239) From here on, British capital established a monopoly in Calcutta's commercial space, which became most evident in case of the jute industry and the managing agencies. Apart from this, the Calcutta port became extremely important for the tea industry of Assam. Regarding the relationship between the jute industry and Calcutta, Sen has mentioned that,

Jute was one industry in which the British capital was in complete command. The capital of this industry was mostly imported from Britain. It meant that finance capital, an aspect of modern capitalism, was operating in full swing in India in the second half of the nineteenth century. Calcutta was one of the bases through which the functions of this capitalism was conducted. As the jute industry was a British monopoly, and as this industry flourished around Calcutta, this city eventually became the centre of British capital predominance. (Sen, *Calcutta in Colonial Transition*, p. 165)

There was some resistance to the British capital during the Swadeshi period. Calcutta became an important centre for nationalist politics from end of the nineteenth century. Let us focus on that aspect now.

Calcutta in Nationalist Politics: Nationalist politics emerged from urban centres in the latter half of the nineteenth century. A distinct anti-British space was created in Calcutta starting from the contestation for the Calcutta Corporation to the outbreak of the Swadeshi movement. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the reformist movement of the Young Bengal shook the static society of the city. Similarly, the Swadeshi movement in the early twentieth century was crucial in the public history of the city. According to Sen, "The instrument that orchestrated both these trends was what may be called the public opinion. During the time of the Young Bengal, public opinion was nascent in its form. It was taking shape under the auspices of Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and that was in connection with their social reform movements. Under the *swadeshi* impact, public opinion had matured into a powerful social force." (Sen, *Calcutta in Colonial Transition*, p. 242)

Two distinct trends can be discerned in the political scenario of twentieth century Calcutta. On one hand, the Muslim society was gradually getting disinterested and alienated in urban matters; on the other, Lord Curzon and the British government started viewing the city as the epicentre of Congress activities. The growing importance of Calcutta in nationalist politics became quite a problem for the Raj. There were numerous protests and processions in the parks and streets of the city. Anti-British sentiments were expressed through protests against Calcutta Municipal Bill and the University Bill. Sen mentions,

Curzon wanted to remodel two institutions which for many years past had shaped the city and built up its essence namely the Calcutta Municipal Corporation and the University of Calcutta. He was visualizing Calcutta as an imperial city manufactured under the pattern of London. The Indians, particularly the Bengalis, thought in a different way. To them the city was the centre of their Renaissance, the house of their culture that opens for them their windows to modernity. Curzon was not opposed to the growth of Calcutta along a modern line but it should grow, he believed, only as a halt for the east-moving Britons….In a broad way, he was opposed to the growth of the city as a parlour for nationalism.

This is how the clash between the Bengali Indians and the Government of Curzon took its origin. Calcutta unfortunately became the battleground of the two. (Sen, *Calcutta in Colonial Transition*, p. 252)

These four issues help us understand the history of Calcutta against the wider backdrop of Bengal and India. More generally, the two books make three extremely important contributions

to the historiography of Calcutta. First, the process of urbanization has been discussed from the eighteenth century. Though there was no great development during these early years of the settlement, but still the city became the nerve-centre of company administration during this century. With a comparative discussion of Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta, the issue has been succinctly described by Sen. Secondly, the long timespan starting from the Company period to the end of the British empire has been dealt with in these volumes. Sen discusses different shifts and changes in the fortunes of Calcutta during these years. We rarely get such a comprehensive overview of a city in this manner. And thirdly, the extensive list of primary material cited in these volumes will be of immense help to future generation of researchers. Overall, the two volumes by Ranjit Sen are welcome addition to the general histories of the city of Calcutta.