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Urbanization in colonial Bengal (1901 – 1941)

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Abstract

The lopsided urbanisation existing in present day India is a legacy of the colonial regime which continues even in independent India. The failure to participate in the technological revolution of the nineteenth century has created for India and particularly for Bengal, not only a lag of a century but is also responsible for all the distortion in urban development in the towns of West Bengal Today. In this light it becomes imperative to study the process and pattern of urbanisation that Bengal underwent in the colonial period. The unparalleled primacy of the colonial maritime nodes dominated the urban scene which has implications even on today's pattern of urbanisation.

The present paper tries to examine the pattern of urbanisation in West Bengal during 1901-1941 and attempts to identify the factors underlying the observed pattern of urbanisation. The socio economic condition of the districts in colonial Bengal will also be analysed to understand the relationship between the two. It further analysis the pattern and growth of towns in Colonial Bengal.

Keywords: Colonial urbanisation, Bengal, Degree of Urbanization, Primate city

Introduction

Indian cities have grown up and have changed their character – both structurally and functionally – in course of the last two hundred and so years. And to understand this growth of cities, colonialism is a critical benchmark. It inaugurated a new political economy and linked India to the imperialist powers in a dependent relationship. This relationship restructured old cities and established new ones. Two kinds of establishments emerged. On one hand the economy led to the growth of administrative and cantonment towns. On the other hand, other settlements grew which were related to international commerce or trade and the growth of major infrastructure projects such as ports and railways. These projects reshaped the national landscape and facilitated the integration of the national economy. Moreover the regions and cities were integrated into the imperial economy ^[1]. Most of these new urban settlements like Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai served as trading posts. As the hinterland became more organised and connected the further development of towns and cities took place.

In the above backdrop the present paper tries to analyse the pattern of urbanisation in the Bengal presidency over the period 1901 – 1941. The objective here is to identify some demographic indicators of urbanism which characterised the process of urbanisation during the last phase of colonial rule in India. This period is of significance because the processes which have historically patterned the contemporary urban structure either emerged or became pronounced during this phase of colonialism ^[2].

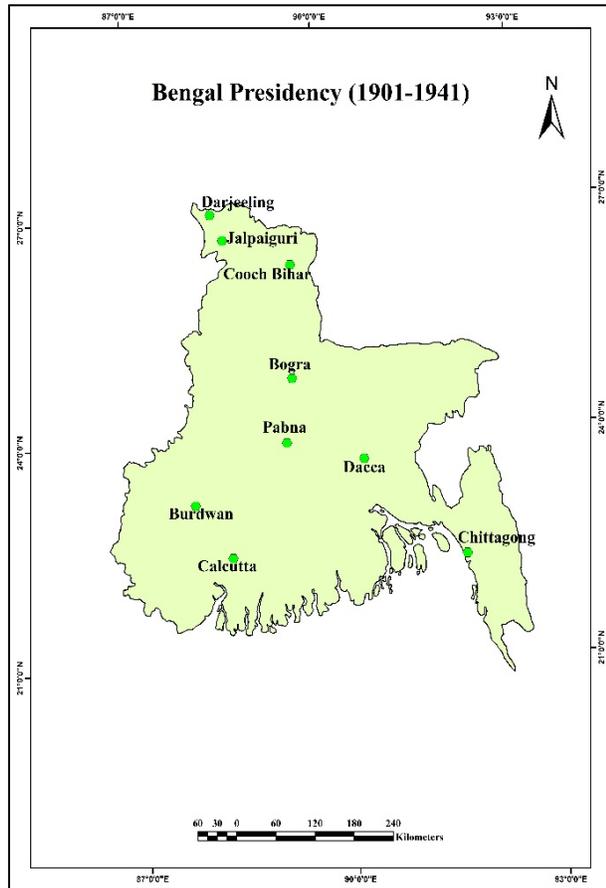
Methodology

To investigate the process of urbanization in Bengal Presidency (Map 1) four parameters have been taken. These have been discussed in the section results and discussion. The parameters are –

- a) A level and degree of urbanisation – on the basis of Census data collected from 1901 to 1941.
- b) The urban morphology –
- c) The variability of the ranks of urban areas and the development of primacy.

The study is based on time series analysis of towns in the Bengal Presidency for four decades between 1901 and 1941. Conclusions are presented in the last section.

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Map 1

Results and discussion

i) –Level and Degree of Urbanisation

In this section the level of urbanization has been calculated for this region by the conventional method, that is, in terms of the percentage of total population in urban places. The data in table 1 clearly indicates the low urban base of the region.

Table 1: Level of Urbanisation in the Bengal Presidency (1901-1941)

Census years	Level of urbanisation
1901	6.06
1911	6.80
1921	7.11
1931	7.68
1941	9.98

Source: Census of India, 1931 and 1941

The low urban base of the region is further demonstrated through the degree of urbanization that is defined as relative number of people living in urban areas. Percent urban [(U/P)*100] and percent rural [(R/P)*100] and urban-rural ratio [(U/R)*100] are used to measure degree of urbanisation. The index is 0 for total population equal to rural population. When whole population is urban, this index is one. When 50 percent of the population is rural, it means that there is one urbanite for each rural person. From the data in table 2 it is clear that percent urban has increased from 6.45 per cent in 1901 to 11.08 per cent in 1941, whereas percent rural has shown gradual decrease from 93.94 per cent to 90.02 per cent. Urban rural ratio a

simple index measuring number of urbanites for each rural person in an areal unit is an important indicator in the process of urbanization. Here it indicates that in 1901 there were around 6 urbanities against every 100 ruralites which increased to 11 in 1941.

Table 2: Degree of Urbanisation in the Bengal Presidency (1901-1941)

Census Years	Per cent Urban	Per Cent Rural	Urban –Rural Ratio (Per Cent)
1901	6.06	93.94	6.45
1911	6.80	93.20	7.30
1921	7.11	92.89	7.65
1931	7.68	92.32	8.32
1941	9.98	90.02	11.08

Further to illustrate the level of urbanization in the region an index of urbanization has been calculated in terms of the expected value of the city size in a given region called the mean city size (MCS) using the index formulated by Arriaga (1976) [3]. The data shows that during all the decades under investigation the level of urbanisation in the region was very low as the MCS was below 25.

Table 3: Index of Urbanisation in the Bengal Presidency (1901-1941)

Census years	Index of urbanisation
1901	5.92
1911	5.75
1921	6.39
1931	6.83
1941	10.98

Source: Census of India, 1931 and 1941

It may be interesting to note the comments and observations offered by the British officials to explain the absence of urbanisation in Bengal. The census commissioner of the province reported in 1901 that race possibly was an important factor in determining the level of urbanization: ‘The Mongoloid element in the population of Bengal may be less inclined to congregate in towns than in Dravidian and Aryan inhabitants of other parts.’ Not satisfied with this explanation the census commissioner in 1931 refuted the hypothesis: ‘It may, however, be questioned whether race has in this case anything to do with the matter and we should be inclined to account for the phenomena not by race but by rainfall. The areas of the greatest precipitation in the peninsula are Bengal, Assam and lower Burma and if living in cities is unpopular, as it certainly is in these regions, it is perhaps on account of the greater degree of discomfort which it involves than on account of the racial composition of the people’ [4].

ii) Urban Morphology and Growth Rates of Towns in Each Size Class

The lop-sided urbanization existing in present – day India is a legacy of the colonial regime. India’s urbanisation is characterized by continuous concentration of population and activities in large cities [5]. This is manifested in a high percentage of urban population being concentrated in class I cities and is evident from the data in tables 4 and 5 and figure 1.

Table 4: Number of Towns in Six Classes in the Bengal Presidency (1901-1941)

Class of Towns	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941
I (100,000 +)	02	03	03	03	04
II (50,000 – 99,999)	01	01	02	04	14
III (20,000 – 49,999)	16	29	35	36	49
IV (10,000 – 19,999)	41	43	41	44	36
V (5,000 – 9,999)	39	34	40	40	42
VI (Below 5,000)	21	19	21	23	12
Total	120	129	142	150	157

Source: Census of India, 1931 and 1941

Table 5: Per Cent of Urban Population in Six Classes of Towns in the Bengal Presidency (1901-1941)

Class of Towns	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941
I (100,000 +)	42.25	43.86	42.78	41.11	46.85
II (50,000 – 99,999)	3.51	1.60	3.49	6.38	14.85
III (20,000 – 49,999)	17.93	25.09	26.56	26.74	24.60
IV (10,000 – 19,999)	22.32	19.77	16.75	16.32	8.16
V (5,000 – 9,999)	11.40	7.88	8.52	7.55	5.08
VI (Below 5,000)	2.58	1.80	1.90	1.89	0.45
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Census of India, 1931 and 1941

It is further postulated that as larger cities like Calcutta have acted as colonial outposts through which 'economic surpluses' were siphoned out and the finished products entered the hinterland looking for a market. The growth of these 'colonial nodes', thus, became concomitant with the weakening of the regional economy, leading to stagnation and decline in population of small and medium towns in the hinterland [7]. Another reason for the increasing dominance of class I cities is graduation of lower order towns into class I categories. This has resulted in top heavy structure of urban population in the Presidency which has given rise to the primacy of Calcutta.

The data shows that in 1901 nearly 42.25 per cent which gradually increased to 46.85 per cent in 1941. Class II towns have shown insignificant increase over the period. On the contrary the class IV, V and VI cities have shown declining trends. This is because the growth rates of bigger towns vis a vis class I towns is often higher than those of the lower order towns, the growth of the latter being determined by that of the regional economy [6].

Table 6: Growth Rates of Towns in Each Size Class in the Bengal Presidency (1901 – 41)

	1901 - 11	1911 - 21	1921 - 31	1931 - 41
I (100,000 +)	27.98	4.79	12.24	73.54
II (50,000 – 99,999)	-43.82	134.18	113.57	254.30
III (20,000 – 49,999)	72.48	18.27	13.08	40.09
IV (10,000 – 19,999)	9.22	-9.00	13.82	-23.85
V (5,000 – 9,999)	-14.79	16.10	3.57	2.43
VI (Below 5,000)	-14.05	13.35	16.18	-63.65

Source: Census of India, 1931 and 1941

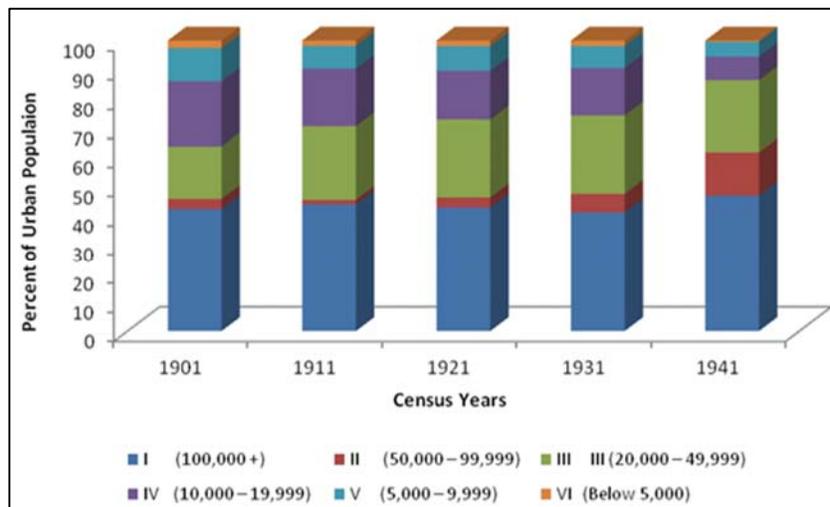


Fig 1: Per Cent of Urban Population in Six Classes of Towns in the Bengal Presidency (1901-1941)

It has been usually observed in the studies on the relationship between growth and size of urban settlements pertaining to the industrialised countries that cities above a certain size do not decline. The growth patterns of the colonial cities, however, do not give any indication of a similar urban scenario.

iii) Variability of Ranks of Urban Areas and Development of Primacy

The indices of urbanisation discussed above is also indicated by the measure of the degree of variability and the net gain or loss of population in the thirty (class I and II towns) largest urban centres within the Bengal Presidency. The

measures of the degree of variability are the average rank, the average deviation of the ranks and the range. The first measure states the average position of each city during 1901-1941 and indicates their average position in the urban hierarchy. The second measure states the degree of consistency of a city's position in the system of settlements. The third gives the number of positions over within which the city's rank has varied.

Some significant facts about the growth patterns of the twenty five largest cities in the Bengal Presidency are revealed in table 7 (Annexure 1) in which the cities seem to fall into three classes according to their range of variation of rank: ten cities show stability, their ranks varying less than five positions; nine show relative stability with their ranks varying from five to nine positions; the remaining six show extreme variation of ten or more positions. Further of the twenty-five cities ten (40 per cent) experienced a net loss in rank, four experienced no net gain and eleven showed a net gain.

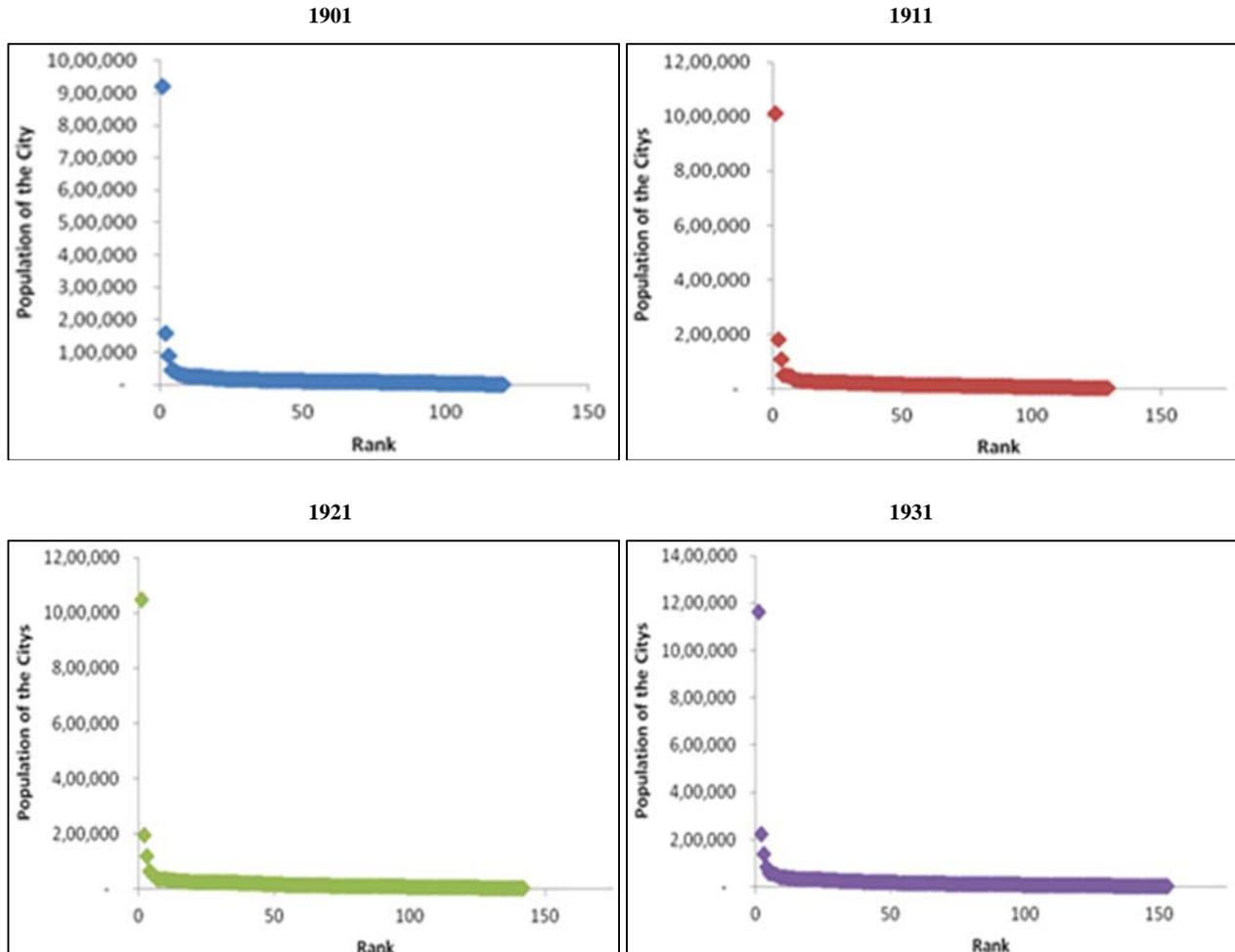
Urbanisation in colonial India was characterised by the existence of high degree of primacy, that is, a high difference between the population sizes of the largest and the second largest city in the region. This was accompanied by an absence of formal urban systems with regional core areas of higher growth, surrounded by urban areas with lower growth. The point may be illustrated with reference to the spatial pattern in industrially developed countries like the United States and Britain during the late nineteenth century [8].

During the colonial period a pattern characterised by the emergence of only a few dominant cores and the general decline of provincial cities. A primate city size distribution was strongly entrenched in the region under consideration. This is evident from the data in table 8 which shows the values of the degree of primacy (ratio of the population of the largest city to the second largest in the region under consideration) of Calcutta. This is further evident from the Zipf's rank size rule plotted for each census for all the cities within the Presidency (Figure 2 -6).

The table indicates that Calcutta had been established as the primate city by 1901 itself and retained its primacy till 1941. Another notable fact is that its primacy was much more marked within its hinterland than it was within the British Indian Empire. It was a regional primate, a phenomenon that did not usually occur in the other colonial countries which were in most cases characterised by the emergence of one major port which was also a national primate [9].

Table 8: Degree of Primacy of Calcutta (1901 -1941)

Census Years	Degree of Primacy
1901	5.85
1911	5.66
1921	5.36
1931	5.18
1941	5.56



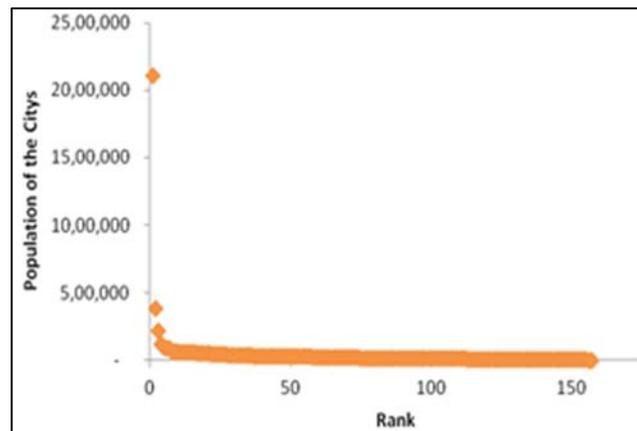


Fig 2: Rank Size of Cities of the Bengal Presidency

Moreover the processes of region formation which formed the backdrop against which spatial patterns designed themselves in Colonial India were strongly linked to the regional primate who instead of encouraging regional urban centres actually undermined their growth.

Conclusions

In this paper an attempt has been made to establish a framework within which the specific phenomenon of colonial urbanisation in the twentieth century can be analysed. Using this framework for the study of urbanisation in the Bengal Presidency during 1901-1941 we find that the processes of urbanisation in colonial India of the twentieth century should be viewed as an expression of the set of relationships.

In terms of spatial patterns, colonial urbanisation replaced the medieval urban structure which had several sub – systems with a pattern of primacy (regional primates developed). Apart from this when considered as a region as a whole the Presidency occurs as a region with high urbanisation. But when the analysis is done at the state level variations are found among the three states.

The rise of Calcutta illustrates two distinctive features: the primacy of colonial port cities, and the substitution of the indigenous urban network with a new colonial urban hierarchy headed the major colonial port city. The first feature, the primacy of Calcutta in Eastern India, has been established and demonstrated.

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3. Arriaga measures the Degree of urbanization by obtaining the average of the size of cities where the population resides in a given region. The statistical

concept of this index is the expected value of the size of the cities. Statistically, the index is expressed as,

$$U = N (C_i^2) / P$$

Where, C =the population of the i^{th} city

N = the total number of cities

P = total population of the region whose U is being calculated

4. Op. Cit 2, 157
5. Kundu. 1983;Theories of City Size Distribution and Indian Urban Structure – A Reappraisal", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 18, No. 3, p. 1364.
6. ibid
7. ibid
8. Op. Cit 2, p. 165 -66.
9. ibid