

## Making of Colonial Calcutta:A Short History of Maidan

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**Abstract:** *This essay examines how the reordering and reorganizing of spaces during colonial rule created new recreational areas, such as playgrounds and parks, through a detailed case study of colonial Calcutta. The article explores how British town planning's dual aspects manifested in 'spaces of play.' These spaces reflected colonial modernity, Victorian values, and colonial masculinity through modern sports, while simultaneously becoming sites of national consciousness and resistance. Furthermore, the article investigates how these spaces triggered broader questions about the civilizational impact of colonialism—whether it imposed new norms or disrupted existing continuities. The article stresses the role of Maidan and explores the politics behind the construction.*

**Key Words:** *Architecture, Bengal, Calcutta, Playground, Town Planning etc.*

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### Introduction

The battle of Plassey was a juncture where the supremacy of the English in Bengal was established. Calcutta became centre of power at the expense of Murshidabad.<sup>1</sup> The British East India Company acquired possession of the three villages Sutanuti, Gobindapur, and Kalikata in 1690, which became Calcutta (or Kolkata). Whether the city had a pre-colonial origin, or Job Charnock can be regarded as the founder remained another realm of inquiry.

Anindita Ghosh underlines, for the colonial government, it was a carefully crafted act of civilizational dispensation, for the indigenous population it signalled disruption and turmoil,<sup>2</sup> while re-ordering, and re-organizing the city. In Ranjit Sen's words, Calcutta's

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origin was entirely indigenous and a colonial growth pattern was imposed on it.<sup>3</sup> With the collapse of native independent, semi-independent fragmented-autonomous polity<sup>4</sup> the English gradually captured the power vacuum. The Company's political influence in other regions of India during that time was relatively minimal. However, in Bengal, the British community was steadily growing. However, the early experiences of Englishmen in Calcutta were marked by considerable challenges. For example,

Captain Hamilton wrote about Calcutta in 1727: 'One year I was there, and there were reckoned in August about twelve hundred English and before the beginning of January there were 460 burials registered in the clerk's book of mortality'. It is not surprising that till 1800 Europeans of Calcutta met on 15 November each year to congratulate each other on having survived'<sup>5</sup>

The significant mortality rates, particularly among young Englishmen in India, exposed their vulnerability to physical well-being in the region. Apart from the impact on commercial and military affairs the notion of 'British Civilizational superiority' was challenged too. They realized that their survival was crucial to effectively oversee the expanding commercial and political ventures. Unlike earlier generations who could accumulate wealth and leave abruptly, they now had to stay in India and safeguard their European bodies in a harsh climate.

Open spaces, places for public gathering and entertainment, and not bazaars play an important role in European town planning. The Hyde Park in London, the Champs Elysee and the riverfront of Seine in Paris, the Unter Den Linden in Berlin, the lakefront in Geneva, Red Square near the Kremlin in Moscow, Central Park in New York, etc. are contemporary examples of such spaces. Therefore, Calcutta was the second city of the Empire and had to be up to that task. Thus, as a health measure against the uncontrolled mortality rate of Europeans, the idea of open space was incorporated into urban planning. Apart from these, sanitation and improvement were seen as key considerations among planners in modern cities around the world, they were used as an important mechanism of colonial propaganda to shape the colonial city per the state's understanding of the urban space and the meanings that such a space held for them, politically and commercially.<sup>6</sup>

According to Sarmistha De and Bidisha Chakraborty the city not only grew spatially, but the complex structure of colonial power also manifested itself clearly in the city and its growth. The development of Maidan was intricately woven with the gradual evolution of the empire<sup>7</sup> where it intertwined with 'clubs-institutions' which became a nodal point of amusement; thus, spaces of recreation were created. First, we need to look at the larger picture i.e. re-ordering of Calcutta, to understand the micro-changes taking place in Maidan.

## The Reordering

Antony D King argued that Calcutta developed in a way that promoted segregation of spaces into zones inhabited by racially different groups.<sup>8</sup> The two parts of the City grew simultaneously, exhibiting a striking contrast in their organization and appearance.<sup>9</sup> Swati Chattopadhyay has shown how health maps and the concept of pathological space used colonial ethnography and ideas of Indian society to develop a discourse of social control over the city.<sup>10</sup> She further argued flaws in imagining Calcutta as Black and White Town. This

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binary oversimplified the complex socio-spatial realities of colonial cities. The urban landscape was characterized by a dynamic interplay of diverse communities, economies, and power relations. Thus, it was completely neither a black town nor a white town. Anindita Ghosh underlined the articulation of exclusiveness and a distinct European urbanity in the organizational layout of the mercantile, bureaucratic, and residential quarters of the White Town ‘sharply underscored the dualism of urban space in a colonial city’, even as mixed populations, urban practices, and intermediate zones complicated strict segregation.<sup>11</sup>

Richard Wellesley set up a Town improvement committee in 1803 and suggested the separation of public buildings and slaughterhouse burial grounds. Widening of Roads and drainage for sanitation, oil lamps, squares, and open space are fundamental to his planning. 1817 Lottery Committee was set up and operated till 1836, and in 1856 Municipal Corporation was set up. All these institutions focused on town planning and sanitation due to issues of plague and other disease.

In Calcutta’s urban imagination clusters of residence based on caste and occupation such as fishermen’s colony (*jelepara*), brazier colony (*knasari para*), colony of liquor vendors (*suripara*), potter’s colony (*kumartuli*), and markets such as Mechhuabazar (fishmarket) and Posta outlined the vocational profile of Calcutta’s everyday life.<sup>12</sup> The British plan to categorize according to professionals, like situating, Collie, labourers near industrial areas like Cossipore, Chitpur, etc. challenged the traditional notion of caste-linguist-based community settlement pattern. While it would seem that the tram was introduced in Calcutta for the convenience of the increasing number of clerk office workers, shops, and businesses, mechanized travel in general came under much criticism<sup>13</sup> on the grounds of caste. Similarly, enclosing the riverine space (keeping the issue of plague in mind) is considered to be interference in the private social-domain of natives. Even the introduction of street lamps for safety was considered to be a tax burden by natives. Thus, the creation of Modern streets, Tramways, Bridges, Parks, Oil Lamps, etc. indicated the re-ordering of the city, for the colonial state it was Civilizational dispensation, while for natives it was disruption and turmoil, Thus, the Western concept of urban planning militated against Bengali notion of residency. The case of Maidan was a bit different, it was completely a British Creation, and during the early days, the native's entry was restricted, making it exclusively for Europeans.

## Maidan

*“English in India would be wise to surround themselves “with English atmosphere, and to defend themselves from the magic of the land by sports, games, clubs.”<sup>14</sup>*

- Anonymous (written in 1903)

P.T Nair notes that: 'The English [have] been famous throughout the civilized world for carrying with them, as a snail does his shell, their own country sports, and amusements<sup>15</sup> The Maidan also hosted events for public entertainment. Tents were erected for circus shows,

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operatic performances, and bioscopes. Hot-air balloons were launched from the Maidan which distributed pamphlets for advertisements.<sup>16</sup>

The Maidan in Calcutta served dual roles: as a breathing space and as a hub of public activity, particularly for the white population. These two evolving concepts often had numerous contradictions. As the central place of Calcutta, the colonial administration recognized its strategic advantage for providing entertainment and leisure to the European community. However, simultaneously, there was a recognition of the necessity to maintain the Maidan as an open space to ensure a healthy environment in a densely populated, tropical city like Calcutta. I will outline some incidents to demonstrate how the Maidan transformed into a space that encompassed not only recreation but also contradictions.

In 1867, a committee was formed to assist an Italian gentleman in establishing an Italian opera in Calcutta. Comprised of eleven members of various nationalities, the committee appealed for a space in the Maidan to construct a temporary structure for the Opera House. The Lieutenant Governor couldn't overlook the issue raised by this application regarding the provision of 'refined entertainment,' particularly for the white population. However, the administration held reservations about any encroachment on the Maidan. They emphasized the critical importance of preserving this open space for the town's health, highlighting the necessity of maintaining its freedom from any obstructions to ensure proper ventilation and outdoor enjoyment for the inhabitants.

In 1898, the Bengal Cyclists' Association petitioned the Government of Bengal to construct a cycling and athletic track in the Maidan, situated between Princep Ghat and Takta Ghat. The appeal was granted on the following conditions specified by the military authorities: 'that no enclosure of any kind is to be allowed, that the ground shall be open to the general public, that the ground is liable at any time to resumption by the military authorities, that the track shall only be set aside for cycling.'<sup>17</sup> Opera and Cycling were considered European recreation, while the native recreation was circus and bioscopes etc. In the course of the routine annual inspection of 1910, the officials of the Government of India expressed surprise at the existence of circuses and bioscopes in the Maidan which, they thought, consorted uneasily with the overall ambiance of Maidan - 'these enclosures [they noted] are unsightly and distract very markedly from appearance of the Maidan, they are a source of danger to the public owing to the unsubstantial nature of the structures, these enclosures of considerable areas of the structures, curtail the space available for open games.'<sup>18</sup>

The First World War hastened the military's influence over the Maidan. In 1920, during discussions about the removal of the Ronaldshay Hut, a temporary structure erected by the Y.M.C.A. on the Calcutta Maidan, it was emphasized that the Hut served as a recreational facility for military personnel. The Government of India granted permission to the Young Men's Christian Association to construct the Ronaldshay Hut on the Calcutta Maidan with the condition that it would be dismantled after the war or earlier, if necessary, with one month's notice, a condition which the YMCA agreed to.

At first, the natives perceived the Maidan as a metaphor for British occupation and identified the space with the European way of living.<sup>19</sup> Gradually Maidan became a popular destination in the afternoon for a relaxed stroll or a carriage ride, where people could observe

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the sahibs and memsahibs, or watch cricket or football matches. It was also a hub for circus performances, bioscope screenings, and the launching of hot air balloons. The Western-educated natives gradually accommodated into Western recreation, however, there were antagonists too in the open space of Maidan. Amtita Bazat Pattika of 21 May 1898 reflected a sentiment: ‘The only remedy left in their hands was to strike in body syces, arm themselves with lathis, go to the maidan and there to thrash all sahebs and outrage their modesty. Then, he said, the Sahebs would take off their topees and fall at their feet.’<sup>20</sup>

## Clubs

*‘In any town in India, the European Clubs are the ‘spiritual citadel’ and ‘real seat of British power’ in the colonies’*

- George Orwell

By 1911, several clubs had established themselves in the Maidan, providing recreational opportunities for Europeans. These clubs offered outdoor games and other activities during the winter months. Some clubs also extended their services to Indians. Among the notable clubs were the Dalhousie Athletic Club, Rangers' Club, Y.M.C.A., Wellesley Lawn Tennis Club, Gentlemen's Golf Club, Devonian Club, Lady's Golf Club, Wanderer's Lawn Tennis Club, Fort William Arsenal Ground and Hastings Athletic Club, Hastings Chapel Tennis Club, Seamen's Mission Club, Soldier's Club, and Army and Navy Tennis Club.

Modern clubs came up by taking on the characteristics of an occupational grouping of coffee houses. European lifestyle was associated with the clubs. Colonial sports flourished in Bengal through those clubs.<sup>21</sup> Saptarshi Deb argues public opinion was articulated and expressed through the creation of new codes and practices and by discussions and debates in the numerous salons, clubs, and cafes that became institutions of this new public sphere.<sup>22</sup> Kasturi Kar puts it, European clubs in India under the Raj served as an instrument to widen the gulf between the rulers and the ruled.<sup>23</sup> Admission into these clubs, though taking race, class, and gender into consideration, differed from previous associations as more than the estate of birth, how versed one was with the new colonial value system decided upon it.<sup>24</sup> Any resolution was arrived at via the process of secret ballot which prepared its members for public life as they had to abide by the verdict of the majority as well as show regard for the opinion of the minority.

Cohen observed clubs created together by Indian and British women - bridged practices of colonial exclusivity, explicitly forging bonds that spanned both race and the colonizer-colonized divide. Further, clubs served as homes away from home for Indian and British women alike<sup>25</sup> The clubland in the colonies also differed from the setting in the metropolis as women were reluctantly allowed. This was not born out of any sense of gender equality, but as the Madras civil servant W.O. Horne claimed, white women if left alone could lower the prestige of the Raj.<sup>26</sup> Clubs were also part of colonial and political networks that included government officials and their wives. Members from disparate political backgrounds joined and participated in club life, tacitly agreeing to leave politics at the club

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door. Clubs allowed these individuals to socialize and better understand one another in a space that was neither controlled by the state nor as private as the home. Some members participated both in India and in Britain's clublands, thus bridging the colony-metropole divide. Since the club space performed as a site for fashioning the best of the British self to native eyes, poorer British folks were denied admittance or reluctantly granted entry.<sup>27</sup>

Clubs were also at the intersection of different community networks, and their Indian and British founders self-consciously created them as a place where these networks could meet. Hindu, Muslim, British, and other communities overlapped and found common ground under the club roof, thus members participated in and challenged "inequalities of power" along now well-understood lines of class, race, and gender<sup>28</sup> The sporadic rise in such clubs greatly added to the associational life in India, and as Carey Watts puts it, resulted "in effect making the Indian Nation",<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

The development of Maidan was intricately woven with the gradual evolution of the empire. Many clubs developed surrounding Maidan. The proliferation of clubs in colonial India served as a multifaceted phenomenon, shaping social, cultural, and political dynamics in the colonial context. These clubs, often associated with European lifestyle and colonial exclusivity, provided spaces for recreation, socialization, and the articulation of public opinion. The reordering of Calcutta was driven by economic and political motives that homogenized the urban landscape and reinforced colonial dominance. In these ongoing processes, the space of play was created and can be studied from the lens of architecture.

## Notes & References

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<sup>2</sup> Anindita Ghosh, *Claiming the City: Protest, Crime, and Scandals in Colonial Calcutta, C. 1860-1920*. (London: Oxford University Press, 2016), 295

<sup>3</sup> Ranajit Sen, *Birth of a Colonial City: Calcutta* (New York: Routledge India, 2019), xi

<sup>4</sup> That rose on the debris of Mughal Empire

<sup>5</sup> Basudeb Chattopadhyay, *A Jingle of Bells: A Short History of the General Post Office*, (Kolkata, K.P. Bagchi, 2004), 28

<sup>6</sup> Sudipto Basu "Spatial Imagination and Development in Colonial Calcutta, c. 1850–1900." *History and Sociology of South Asia*, SAGE 10, no. 1 (2016), 35

<sup>7</sup> Sarmistha De and Bidisha Chakraborty. "Maidan: The Open Space in History." *Social Scientist* 38, no. 1/2 (2010), 9

<sup>8</sup> Spatial Imagination and Development in Colonial Calcutta, 37

<sup>9</sup> *Maidan*, 4

<sup>10</sup> Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: Nationalism, Modernity and the Colonial Uncanny* (Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2005), 70–73.

<sup>11</sup> *Claiming the City: Protest, Crime, and Scandals in Colonial Calcutta*, 39

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 51

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 56

<sup>14</sup> Patrick McDevitt, "The King of Sports: Polo in Late Victorian and Edwardian India," *International Journal of the History of the Sport* (March 2003) 20.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

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<sup>17</sup> P.W.D., Miscellaneous Public Improvements Branch, File No. 1M/22-1-1 of 1910, January 1911 (WBSA)

<sup>18</sup> *Maidan*, 13

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 17

<sup>20</sup> *Maidan*, 17

<sup>21</sup> Suman Mukherjee “Leisure and Recreation in Colonial Bengal: A Socio-Cultural Study.” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 71 (2010), 770

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<sup>23</sup> Kar, 535

<sup>24</sup> From Clubs to Nation, 494

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin B Cohen, “Networks of Sociability: Women’s Clubs in Colonial and Postcolonial India.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 30, no. 3 (2009), 165

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<sup>28</sup> Networks of Sociability, 170 [Cited from Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*]

<sup>29</sup> From Clubs to Nation, 495