CHAPTER II
A HISTORICAL SKETCH OF POVERTY IN KOLKATA

2.01. Overview
To study the historical origin of poverty in the Kolkata Metropolis, it may be worthwhile to recapitulate the beginning phases of poverty in India and that also of West Bengal (of which Kolkata is the capital city). The political history of both India and West Bengal needs to be highlighted along with since the conditions of poverty initiated with the British colonialism in the Indian sub-continent. This Chapter will deal with the origin of poverty in the pre-independence period. It is to highlight the significance of the political, economic, and social conditions associated with this period that have been the major causes of growth of poverty in the Metropolis and its present existence.

2.02. Beginning phase of poverty
2.02.01. Beginning phase of poverty in India
From the close of the eighteenth century right up to the beginning of the nineteenth century, India had been wading through a bewildering wealth of economic, political, and social ideals. Politically overthrown by the British in the late eighteenth century, the country had been wading through a civilization, where the economic drain as a resultant force of the political power over India caused serious poverty. This drain was in the form of excess of exports over imports. Between 1835 and 1872, this amounted to L500,000,000 which England kept back as benefit. It is true that the British speeded up the development of infrastructure and trade in India but the Indian manufacturers lost their industries, the cultivators were drowned in debt and as a result black shadow of famine often engulfed the people. When British first came to India, British Industries were incompetent to the Indian Industries. After seizing power they ruined India’s flourishing industries and turned the country into an agricultural hinterland of Britain. It was British colonialism, which snatched the seeds of prosperity and development. Wealth flowed into Britain from India, and laid in the foundation of the success of Industrial Revolution. Once the Industrial Revolution in Britain had been achieved, the question of finding market for the finished goods came up. This necessitated a changing economic relationship between India and Britain. India began to be converted into a market for British manufactured goods. From then on the process of systematic extinction of the domestic industries went on at an incredible rate, which was particularly affected by tariff discrimination in favour of the British. The effect of the
rapid transformation of the Indian economy had a tremendous effect on the urban structure. In Britain the destruction of the old industry was accompanied by the growth of new machine industry; but in India ruin of millions of artisans and craftsmen was not accompanied by any alternative growth of new forms of industry. This was of course the beginning phase of poverty in India. Bengal was no exception. According to the report of The Indian Industrial Commission of the British Government in 1918 Industries, 'At a time when the West of Europe, the birthplace of the modern industrial system, was inhabited by uncivilized tribes, India was famous for the wealth of her rulers and for the high artistic skill of her craftsmen. And even at a much later period, when merchant adventurers from the West made their first appearance in India, the industrial development of the country was at any rate not inferior to that of the more advanced European nations.' This statement was also applicable with greater validity in Bengal Province (Roy, R., 1971).

2.02.02. Beginning phase of poverty in Bengal

2.02.02.01. Status of Bengal prior to the arrival of the British

Historians agree to the fact that prior to the British arrival in India, Bengal was the wealthiest province of the Indian sub-continent. Foreign travelers in the mediaeval ages have left impression of the province’s flourishing agriculture, industry and trade. The British were attracted by the wealth and industries of Bengal and its strategic position in international trade. After the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the British gained control of Bengal. Lord Clive was struck by the affluence of Murshidabad, the then capital city of Bengal Province one of the prosperous province of India. He stated that this city was as extensive, populous and rich as the city of London with this difference that individuals in Murshidabad possessed infinitely greater property than in London (Roy R., 1971).

2.02.02.02. British plunder

At no point of time before the arrival of the British Bengal’s economy was ruined. The British plunder of Bengal started by ways of violence, destruction and oppression. Immediately after 1757, they took up a determined policy of monopolizing manufacturing. It was from then that huge quantities of material resources were drained to sustain the Industrial Revolution in Britain. As a result countless number of craftsmen lost their jobs and turned into agricultural labourers. The outcome of this was that the prosperity of Bengal declined with the decline in cotton and silk industries for which Bengal was famous. Taxation was a substantial source of profit to the British rulers – which was drained out of Bengal. Bengal was ruralised. In 1901 Digby stated: Time was not more distant than a century and a half ago when Bengal was much more wealthy than Britain (Roy R. 1971). In 1917 nationalist leader, Lala Lajpat Rai spoke of Bengal as the ‘brightest jewel’ struck on the British Crown in the eighteenth century (Roy R. 1971). On the outcome of Britain’s work in Bengal, J. L. Nehru wrote in 1944, 'A significant fact which stands out is that
those parts of India which have been longest under British rule are the poorest today. ... Bengal certainly was a rich prosperous province before the British came. It is difficult to get over the fact that Bengal, once so rich and flourishing, after 187 years of British rule, accompanied by strenuous attempts on the part of the British to improve its condition and to teach its people the art of self-government, is today a miserable mass of poverty-stricken, starving and dying people (Roy R., 1971). Bengal has been the worst victim of the British imperialism.

2.02.03. Beginning phase of poverty in Kolkata

2.02.03.01. East India Company’s influence
In the background of the political turmoil of the country the colonial city of Kolkata emerged. By the end of the seventeenth century East India Company of England had established a factory at Hugh about 25 miles upstream along River Hugli from Kolkata. It was primarily to promote trade and business interest of the Company. Due to frequent disputes with the then local Mughal Governor, the company’s men under the leadership of Job Charnock shifted down the river and came to Sutanati on 24th August 1690 and set their factory there. This was the beginning of the growth of the future Metropolis of Eastern India (Census of India 1876, 1878).

2.02.03.02. Birth of modern Kolkata
In spite of Kolkata’s birth in 1690, modern Kolkata dates back since 1757. The battle of Plassey fought on 23rd June 1757 established the English Supremacy in Bengal. From that date onwards the growth of the new capital of Bengal Province was unchecked (Census of India 1876, 1878).

2.02.03.03. Growing significance of Kolkata
It is evident from the economic history of Kolkata that the roots of capitalist economy was deep rooted in Kolkata’s economy with the arrival of the Colonial rulers in late seventeenth century. The growth of Kolkata as a ‘Primate City’ in Bengal resulted in unbalanced growth of the Bengal’s economy. On the other hand trade and commerce activities led to the growth of the Port of Kolkata and hence the city flourished and grew. The British plunder and exploitation led to occurrence of famines and food shortage several times in Bengal. The flourishing wealth of the ‘City of Palaces’ attracted the impoverished rural poor in search of livelihood and food. With the arrival of the Europeans economic opportunities began to be created in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The expansion of trade increased demand for manufacturing goods thereby facilitating economic mobility. Its unique geographical position in relation to Bengal Province - the fact of its being already a great city together created a tendency towards centralization of industrial, commercial and service development (Sircar, S., 1960).

2.02.03.04. Impact of the ‘primate’ character of the city
It was in the background of the decline of Bengal that the metropolitan city of Kolkata started growing. The seeds of capitalist mode of production and social relation got deep rooted with the...
oncoming of the imperial rulers. It created a gigantic labour market in the new town, which generated a centripetal movement of population towards it. As the city of Kolkata has grown and developed at phenomenal rate, poverty became a part and parcel of the city. The typical 'primate' character of development led to the concentration of immigration into Kolkata from the impoverished countryside. By the middle of the eighteenth century the population exceeded one lakh, the number being 1,17,744 in 1752. In the early years of British rule, the population increased manifold during 1710 to 1750. The city has failed to provide services, sanitation, water, housing, infrastructure, employment, education and health to the rapidly growing population. As a result the bulk of the population living in slums, pavements, and squatters have been estimated to be growing. It is an accepted fact that the organic growth of a city is very much linked with the growth of slums, squatters, and street dwellers – and hence related to the growing number of ‘Urban Poor’. The dearth of space and the consequent high rents compelled the labourers and other poor people to live in ill-ventilated and insanitary single-roomed tenants, which afford neither any sufficient light and fresh air nor any adequate accommodation. The growth of Kolkata since the British rule was associated with growing de-industrialization and unemployment as a whole in the Bengal Province. This particular and distinctive condition of the growth of Kolkata had laid its cruel imprint on the patterns of living of the people of this vast city as a whole.

2.02.03.05. Impact of Kolkata’s growth
The growth of Kolkata exerted a somewhat paralytic effect on the development of other urban places in Bengal and thus became a barrier to the balanced urban development of the Bengal province. It is evident from early literature on Kolkata that it was not until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that the importance of the city began to grow. It started growing as an administrative centre. The power and prestige of the English Company began to grow and spread with the flourishing trade and commerce from the late eighteenth century onwards and attained its peak in the nineteenth century. It was during this time that it acquired greater significance and glamour. “In 1803, a distinguished Englishman, Lord Vallentine remarked, ‘The Town of Kolkata is at present well worthy of being the seat of the Indian Government both from its size and magnificent buildings,..........’” (Sircar, S., 1960). Kolkata became the capital of British India in 1773, which it retained till 1911.

2.03. Bengal Famine and its impact on Kolkata
2.03.01. British exploitation and its impact
Since the early days of British domination, the British method of administration and exploitation had reared a pattern of life in India that did not allow half of the population to experience the
satisfaction of a full meal throughout the year. The process of economic deterioration had been with Bengal for 190 years of British domination and the famines are demonstrations of it (Roy, R., 1971). Estimates of population figure in Kolkata during the early British rule have been very inconsistent. The population was probably much often thinned by famine.

2.03.01.01. 1752 famine

In 1752 there has been a severe famine in the town. Holwell spoke about the ‘walking skeletons’ visible in the streets of Kolkata and parents selling their children to meet their hunger in the same year (Census of India 1876, 1878).

2.03.01.02. 1762 famine

In the year 1762 another famine followed which took away 50,000 lives of the Natives in the Province of Bengal (Census of India 1876, 1878).

2.03.01.03. 1770 famine

From mid eighteenth century, the British began to change the face of Bengal’s agriculture. Farmers were forced to cultivate Indigo to meet the increasing demand of dyes in Britain and Europe. Food shortage, and subsequent epidemics occurred as a result of agricultural irregularities, in Bengal. In the year 1770, food shortage was so acute that almost one-third of the population of Bengal and Bihar lost their lives. This was Britain’s first big achievement. According to Mr. Hickey, in 1770 occurred perhaps the greatest famine on record of Bengal, which carried off between 15th July and 10th September no less than 76,000 people on the streets of Calcutta. A British writer Dr. Dean Inge had thrown light on the process that brought about this catastrophe. According to him the first impulse to the Industrial Revolution in Britain, which after the victories of Clive flowed into the Country in a broad stream for about 30 years. The people of Bengal Province were squeezed to pay the bulk of the money. The ill-gotten wealth played the same part in stimulating England’s industries (Census of India 1876, 1878).

2.03.01.04. Famines between 1770 and 1900

Subsequent famines of various dimensions, 18 in number took place between 1770 and 1900 (Census of India 1876, 1878).

2.03.01.05. 1943 famine

In 1943 again a terrible famine ravaged the whole of Bengal. It was a terrible experience that Bengal and Bihar passed through almost at the threshold of British Rule in India. There was almost a complete breakdown of health services following the acute food shortage in Bengal. According to official reports no satisfactory attempt was made to deal with the situation. In words of B. V. Roy (1943), ‘It is the ironies of modern civilization that extreme wealth and luxury existed side by side with extreme poverty and destitution. The poor has never been so clamorously been with Kolkata ever before. The sanitary aspects of thousands of people living,
eating, sickening and dying on the streets are an appalling problem for the authorities to tackle' (Roy, B. V., 1943).

2.03.02. Food problem of 1943
The food problem of 1943 had a political background. The dislocation of food grain supply 
ranked amongst the most important item of the sabotage movement. In the name of co-operation 
the saboteurs infiltrated into the food committee and negotiated their utility. The social and 
political identity of the Food Committee members with the class of the anti-social elements had 
its free play. No comprehensive scheme on rationing was taken up. The Ministry and local 
authorities failed to deal with black markets, speculation in and hoarding of food grains. The 
worst sufferers were the poorer classes who could not avail the high prices of food (Corporation 
of Calcutta, 1943).

2.03.03. Inflation of food prices in 1943
In the same year India which produced the vast bulk of her food was partly starving, while, 
England which had to import about two-third of its food had stocked food and was at an optimum 
nutritional level. The prices of staple food in England during the World War II had risen by 25 
percent, while in Kolkata it increased by 800 percent and that too for a Country proverbially 
poor. In considering means for alleviating the distress, the ‘Grow More Food Campaign’ could 
not yield immediate results. The situation was extremely grave that Bengal was passing not 
merely through a crisis but also through a state of things, which was unparallel to the economic 
history of the province for a long past time. The distress prevailing in the rural areas was 
appalling and called for help. The seriousness of the food problem was given due notice but not 
importance. Rice was selling at an abnormally high price and even at the price it was not 
available earlier. The food crisis that Bengal faced in 1943 was unprecedented in the history of 
modern India (Corporation of Calcutta, 1943).

2.03.04. Invasion of the poor in Kolkata
1943 was a landmark regarding the invasion of the rural poor from Bengal province into the city. 
Hordes of starving, semi-naked and hunger-stricken people of the outlying villages and districts 
poured into the city to procure some foodstuffs. The fair streets of the city of Kolkata, the second 
city of the British Empire saw a ghastly procession of living skeletons clad in filthy rags and 
tatters, roaming about, gazing agape with sunken and lusterless eyes at the beautiful and splendid 
mansions replete with every modern lavishness and luxury, and clamorously waiting for food 
(Roy, V. P., 1943).

2.03.05. City’s condition in 1943
In a news column of the Kolkata Municipal Gazettee in 1943, J. H. Methold drew the attention of 
the Mayor to the condition of the city’s ‘dustbins’ describing them as ‘appalling’. Beggars
assembled round the dustbins to pick up refuse, scattered them about the streets. He urged the Corporation to assist or encourage the police to take necessary actions in this matter. It was according to them one of the important jobs to remove them from the city as quickly as possible keeping in view the health aspect of the city. But what they failed to notice was that the beggars were hunger-stricken people who had come from outlying villages to the city in search of food. T. G. Narayan in his book 'Famines over Bengal' gave a danger signal that gleamed ahead – ‘Millions of children in Bengal have been cruelly stunted by the famine and the toll that they are going to have on the future is terrible to contemplate. 20 years hence they’ll breed a feeble generation. In the years to come, their revenge on the society which failed to care for them adequately in the present will be a bitter one indeed’ (Corporation of Calcutta, 1943)

2.04. Social and economic disparity

2.04.01. The European Kolkata and the Black Town

In any Asiatic City where Europeans had settled, there have generally arisen side by side a White Town (of the colonial rulers) and Black Town (of the Natives). In the eighteenth and nineteenth century these two parts of Kolkata town presented a remarkable contrast. To the east and north of the city lay the Black Town- the town of the Natives which contained the best and the worst of the residential quarters and housed the bulk of the city’s population. It included the market area of Barabazar, and the old settled neighbourhoods of Sibhambazar, Jorasanko, Sobhabazar and Shyampukur. To the south of the city lay the seat of the government, public houses, recreational places, hotels and the big palatial houses of the Europeans intersected here and there with Native Bustees. The greatest improvements had taken place in the southern parts of the town. The Indian part was a contrast to the beauty of Chowringhee. The Chowringhee area formed an entire village of the finest European Palaces. This showed distinctly the inequality that existed between the two parts of the Town. In contrast to the European part of Kolkata in the south comprising of huge palatial buildings the Native part in the north of the Town was totally neglected in respect of development and improvement. (Thomas, F. C., 1997).

2.04.02. City of Palaces and City of Huts

Calcutta was coined as the ‘City of Palaces’ during the British Rule – the phrase only visualizes the big European mansions of the Chowringhee, the Belverde in Alipur, the Government House in the city and a few isolated buildings of the high intellectual society with large compounds and spacious halls. The aggregate area of the sites of these buildings measured not even a five hundred part of the then Kolkata city (Roy Choudhury, K. C., 1927). Kolkata was still a city of huts and bustees where men, women and children huddled together like domestic animals. There were thousands for whom the naked sky was their canopy. Majority of the population in the
Black Town of the natives were poor living in kutchha huts. Rudyard Kipling (1920) describes it as “a city of unspeakable poverty, of famine and ...disease” (Thomas, F. C., 1997).

2.04.03. Distribution of pucca houses and huts from 1821 to 1876
A glance at Figure No. 2.01 showing the distribution of pucca houses and huts is sufficient to reveal some glaring inconsistencies in the number of huts. The inconsistency in the figures (Table No.2A) regarding kutchha huts shows that the figures were not compiled following the same system. The number of kutchha huts showed a gradual decline from 1831 onwards and between 1866 and 1872 the number of kutchha huts had almost decreased by half its number. In the next 5 years there has been a significant increase in the number of kutchha huts (Census of India 1876, 1878).

2.04.04. Distribution of kutchha huts in the city, 1876
The Census Report of the Town of Kolkata of 1876 gives an insight into the distribution of kutchha huts. During this period, Kolkata was divided into 18 Wards. The limits of the 18 Wards were divided into 5 broad Divisions. The first, second and third Division together represented the Northern Division where the Natives resided. The forth and fifth Divisions together formed the Southern Division where the Europeans resided. The Wards of Barabazar (Ward No.7) Jorasanko (Ward No.6), Colutala (Ward No.8) and Baubazar (Ward No.10) constituted the commercial heart of the town and constituted a heterogeneous population. In Colutala, 68 percent lived in kutchha huts and this was the most crowded part of the city with a density no less than 214 persons/ acre. Similarly Baubazar also had a crowded collection of huts. Within the Northern Division or the Black Town area, in Muchipara Ward (Ward No.9) almost 57 percent inhabitants were still lodged in kutchha huts. Taltala (Ward No. 14) and Colinga (Ward No.15) formed the great Mohomedan (Muslim) quarter, and had larger bustees than perhaps any other parts of the Town. Here about 75 percent of the population resided in kutchha huts. Kumartuli (Ward No.2) and Shyampukur (Ward No.1) comprised of several large bustees (Census of India, 1876).

2.04.05. Resident of the rich and wealthy people
Black Town was not exclusively resided by the teeming majority living in poverty. Amidst the thatched mud houses were situated some handsome houses belonging to the Armenian and Parsee merchants, and Bengali Gentlemen of great wealth. Jorabagan (Ward No.5) and Jorasanko
Chapter II: A Historical Sketch Of Poverty In Kolkata

(Ward No.6) were resided by several wealthy Native families. In these two Wards in the Northern Division population was mainly lodged in pucca houses. While in the rest of the Wards majority resided in kutchha huts. The Southern Division was a contrast to the Northern one. Here, palatial mansions occupied Park Street (Ward No.16) and Baman Bustee (Ward No.17). The centre of the town was occupied partly by houses of businessmen and poor class residents (Census of India 1876, 1878).

2.04.06. Thatched huts-the residence of the poor
The thatched huts with sidewalls of mud or mats, bamboo, and other combustible materials accommodated a larger section of the poor population in the Town. The erection of thatched huts was not permitted since 1837 and tiled huts gradually replaced the thatched huts in the following years (Census of India, 1876, 1878).

2.04.07. Proportion of persons living in pucca and kutchha huts during 1850 to 1901
During 1850 to 1901 the proportion of population living in kutchha houses declined substantially. According to Simm’s estimates in 1850, almost 68.4 percent lived in kutchha houses in the town. In 1876 the proportion of population residing in kutchha houses declined to 54.2 percent. In 1901 almost 60.2 percent lived in kutchha houses whereas 39.80 percent lived in pucca houses in the British Capital of India (Figure No.2.02 and Table No.2B).

2.04.08. Crowding in 1876
In 1876 the average number of persons living in pucca houses varied from 8 persons / house to 23 persons / house in Chowringhee against the town average of 11 persons / pucca house. In respect to this a kutchha hut had 6 persons / huts in the Northern Division to 16 persons / hut in the congested area of Barabazar (Census of India, 1876).

2.04.09. Residential segregation of the poor
The local names of the various residential areas in the city during the early British period suggest a different picture of ‘the City of Palaces’. From the earliest days the Black Town was divided into residential areas based on caste and religion. The Hindus resided in one part of the city while the Muslims in another and the Portuguese and Armenians in some other part of the city. The Hindu areas were subdivided into quarters of Brahmmins and the others. The East India Company had allocated its workmen separate quarters in the town. Neighbourhood names like Kumartuli (potters), Domtuly (scavengers), Goaltuly (milkmen), Colutala (oil-pressers), Sankaritala (conch
shell workers), Jelliatala (fishermen), Kassaituly (butchers), Putuatala (painters), Kansaripara (bell metal workers), Kambulitala (dealers in country blankets), Kamarpara (blacksmiths), Haripara (sweepers), Chutorpara (carpenters), Darjipara (tailors), Dhopapara (washermen), Beparitola (petty traders) etc are names of local neighbourhoods which dates back from 1757, when the East India Company directed that the poor labourers of Kolkata should be incorporated into guilds and reside in separate Wards of the town (Census of India 1876, 1878).

2.05. Town construction and eviction of poor bustee-dwellers (1901-1911)

2.05.01. Beginning of town construction

As the city grew in importance with flourishing trade, the European settlers initiated town construction and development. To give space for the residence of the foreign settlers and opening out roads, congested bustees resided by the poor Native dwellers were evicted and cleared in many cases.

2.05.01.01. Structural change in Central block

The rise in land rent and the development in trade have further contributed to the inner morphological changes in the city. Responding to the rising land value and rent in the city, Landlords had demolished small kutchha buildings and in their place had erected large masonry houses, either for use as shops or as wealthy residential quarters (Census of India 1911). The central block of the city during the early twentieth century consisting of Barabazar (Ward No.7), Colutala (Ward No 8), Muchipara (Ward No.9), Baubazar (Ward No.10), Paddapukur (Ward No.11), Waterloo Street (Ward No.12), Fenwick Bazar (Ward No.13), Taltala (Ward No.14), Colinga (Ward No.15), Park Street (Ward No.16), Baman Bustee (Ward No.17) and Hastings (Ward No.18) experienced a structural change along with a demographic change. The major change has been in Baman Bustee, Park Street and Colinga constituting the main European quarters of Kolkata demonstrated the maximum change mainly due to the operation of the Bustee Regulations, which have been effectual after 1888, either in reducing congestion of bustees or clearing them away altogether.

- In Ward No.7 (Barabazar), which was a centre of trade and commerce in the City, the number of bustee reduced by 52 during 1901-1911 (Census of India 1911, 1913).
- In Ward No.15 (Colinga) structural changes have been more extensive. The number of bustees was reduced from 99 to 54. A large plot of land between Park Street on the north and Rawdon Street on the east was studded with huts but latter became site of European settlements each occupied by less than 20 persons. Earlier each bustee contained on an average 23 occupied huts. Removal of 45 bustees represented a displacement of 5,175 persons (Census of India 1911, 1913).
• In Ward No.13 (Fenwick Bazar) extensive acquisition of land were made by the Corporation for the extension of the Municipal Office, the Sir Stuart Hogg Market, for opening out new roads and improving the neighbourhood of the Corporation office. In consequence several bustee huts were demolished (Census of India 1911, 1913).
• In Ward No.16 (Park Street) 4 large bustees containing 150 huts were removed and residential houses were constructed for European tenants (Census of India 1911, 1913).
• In Ward No.17 (Baman Bustee) 5 big bustees containing 325 huts were replaced by pucca residential houses with large compounds, each ordinarily occupied by one European family (Census of India 1911, 1913).

2.05.01.02. Structural change in North Kolkata

• In Ward No.8 (Collutala) the acquisition of land for Presidency College and Medical College Hospital and other public buildings caused the removal of large number of bustee forcing many cooly (porter) population to move out (Census of India 1911, 1913).
• In the neighboring Maniktala Municipality, a large number of bustees were demolished during 1901-1911. This was due to the acquisition of land made by the Corporation for the fringe area drainage project and by the Railways for the extension of the Sealdah Station (Census of India 1911, 1913).

2.05.01.03. Structural change in South Kolkata

• In Ward No.22 (Bhawanipur), which was the most densely populated suburban ward in 1901, bustee improvements have been carried out and simultaneously large bustees were gradually cleared and replaced by a number of residential houses (Census of India 1911, 1913).
• In Ward No.23 (Alipur) bustee land was acquired by the Government and the Corporation, while private parties cleared considerable bustees (Census of India 1911, 1913).

2.05.02. Bustee demolition and eviction

Altogether 75 bustees were demolished during the decade 1901-1911. Nearly 8 large bustee improvement projects were carried out and in consequence large bustees were demolished too. In some cases to avoid the expense of improvement of sanitation the bustee landlords converted them into vacant lands. It was the result of the overflow of Native population from the neighbouring European Ward Nos.15 (Colinga), 16 (Park Street), and 17 (Baman Bustee) that had led to the growth of new bustees and increasing
2.06. Crowding and congestion in the city

2.06.01. Crowding in 1876
According to the 1876 Census the average number of persons living in kutchha hut was 9.7 persons per hut and that of pucca house was 11.10 persons per house. Of the total population of 4,09,036 persons, 1,87,303 or 45.8 percent lived in pucca house and 54.25 percent lived in kutchha huts (Figure No. 2.03 and Table No.2C). The average number of inhabitants of pucca house per acre was 49.9 and that of kutchha huts was 54.2 persons (Census of India 1876, 1878).

2.06.02. Crowding in 1901
By the beginning of the twentieth century the shortage of dwellings in the city proper was so great that an intensely pronounced distress had been caused by it. Natural consequence was terrible congestion in the city. From the point of view of minimum standard of overcrowding it was thus evident that a very large proportion of the population lived in overcrowded houses in 1901. The figures showed that more than half of the population lived in \( \frac{1}{4} \)-a room/ head. Almost 38.8 percent of the population lived in \( \frac{1}{4} \)-a room/ head in kutchha houses. It gave a fair idea of the extent of congestion in bustees. Nearly 89.83 percent lived in less than \( \frac{1}{4} \)-a room per head. Nearly 58.25 percent of the total population lived in less than \( \frac{3}{4} \)-a room per head in kutchha houses (Figure No.2.04 and Table No.2D). The number of families living in kutchha houses was 2.7 times more than the number living in pucca houses. The number of kutchha houses was 2.4 times more than pucca houses. The residents of kutchha house were 1.5 times greater than the number of population living in pucca houses (Census of India 1901, 1903).

2.06.03. Occupancy rate, 1901
From the point of view of occupancy rate in 1901 (Figure No.2.05 and Table No.2E) it was evident that the average number of persons per room living in kutchha houses was 2.42 in contrast to 1.72 persons per room living in pucca houses. The average for both was 2.21.
Chapter II: A Historical Sketch Of Poverty In Kolkata

According to the minimum standard of overcrowding, 2 persons per room have been taken as the standard. The average number of persons for kutchha houses was above the minimum standard and thus showed the extent of crowding in the city (Census of India 1901, 1903).

2.07. Kolkata Corporation and the poor

2.07.01. Objectives of the new corporation in 1923

In 1924, when the new Corporation with a changed Constitution and added responsibility came into being, the proposed items of work were:

1. Free primary education
2. Free Medical relief for the poor
3. Purser food and cheaper food and milk supply
4. Better supply of filtered and unfiltered water
5. Better sanitation in bustees and congested areas
6. Housing for the poor
7. Development of suburban area
8. Improved transport facilities
9. Greater efficiency of administration

The 9 fold objectives were laid down to direct the activities to the service of the poor. Schemes were formulated to expand the provision of Corporation schools for the poor. Ward Health Association was opened in each Ward for the treatment mainly among the poor bustee people. In several big bustees improvement work was carried on for opening up bustee roads and providing open spaces and water stands. The immediate step towards bustee improvement was given to the sanitary improvements since the sanitary in bustees were in deplorable condition. A committee was also formed to consider the question of provision of housing for the poor (Das, S. R., 1925).

2.07.02. Imposition of tax on the poor hut dwellers

But the ‘City of Palaces’ was a sad reading before and after the passing of the first Municipal Act of 1924 from the point of view of extraction of heavy taxes and rent from thousands of poor occupying dirty and dingy huts all over the city (Corporation of Calcutta, 1935).

2.08. The Beggars in Kolkata

2.08.01. The Problem

The most striking and distinctly visible problem related to urban poor and their poverty in the city has been the beggars, living in unhygienic and filthy conditions. Beggars had been an inseparable part of Kolkata since the occurrence of famines and food shortage in Bengal from...
1770 onwards. The Medicancy Committee defined a 'beggar' as a person found on the street, premise or a place for the purpose of begging or receiving alms or of inducing giving of alms. The beggar problem in Kolkata and neighbouring districts had engaged the attention of the Government from time to time (Corporation of Calcutta, 1935). Various works on Kolkata had dealt with the beggar problem in the city and had suggested means to get rid of this growing peril. During the later part of the British Rule beggary had been a serious problem in the metropolis. Mr. W. R. Humphery (1943) even went to the extent of proposing the need to segregate the beggars and vagrants of Kolkata. He complained that the beggars were using the over ground public shelter and also realized the difficulty of expelling this class of people from the city (Corporation of Calcutta, 1943).

2.08.02. Vagrants in 1876 Census
According to the 1876 Census, number of houseless vagrants was 256 of whom 214 were males and 42 females (Census of India 1876, 1978).

2.08.03. Resolution against beggary
On 3rd July 1918, a resolution was moved in the Bengal Legislative Council by the Hon'ble Balre Kishori Mohan Choudhuri, recommending that a committee should be appointed to consider the desirability of legislative action to discourage professional beggary in the different provincial municipalities. It was withdrawn on the assurance given by Sir Henry Wheeler on behalf of the Government. The Corporation appointed a special Committee to consider this matter and submitted a Report on 19th March, 1919 (Corporation of Calcutta, 1929). According to this Report, a large proportion of beggar population consisted of child-beggars and of persons suffering from bodily infirmities. The Committee pointed out that although the Corporation had no direct responsibility for the relief of the poor, they were vitally interested in the mitigation of a public nuisance and a menace to the health of the city. As regard to the able-bodied persons on the streets, the Committee recommended that they should be prosecuted and sent to jail and said that the Kolkata and suburban Police Act should be amended so as to provide for a maximum period of imprisonment for 6 months. For the aged it was suggested that an alms-house should be provided (Corporation of Calcutta, 1929).

2.08.04. Mitigating beggary
In view of the proposals, the Government of Bengal appointed a team to work out the practical details. The Medicancy Committee in their report in 1920 recommended the establishment of the following:

• Receiving centres and casual wards
• Housing for incurable
• Alms-house
The Poor Law Institutions were not called into existence. The Government of Bengal did not do anything though the Corporation of Kolkata expressed their willingness to bear a fair share of the expenditure (Basu, N. N., 1925).

2.08.05. Beggars in Kolkata and its suburbs
In 1911, Kolkata and its suburbs together accounted for 5,624 beggars. Out of these nearly two-fifth was born in Kolkata and 24-Parganas, and the majority of the remaining came from Bihar and Orissa and United Provinces (Census of India 1911, 1913). The principal part of the problem resolved around dealing with three classes of beggars mainly - the lepers, the paralyzed, and the victims of diseases (Forrester, J. C., 1930).

2.08.06. Beggars in the early twentieth century
The survey of the beggars during the early decades of the twentieth century revealed a fluctuating trend in the total number of beggars in Kolkata. The beggar population had fluctuated in the city during the early decades. In 1901 the beggar population was 7651. Nearly 31 percent of these were dependants. There was a decrease in the beggar population by 43 percent from 7651 in 1901 to 4390 in 1911. It increased by almost 52 percent to 6691 beggars in 1921. Almost 40 percent of the beggars were dependants. By the next decade, the beggar population declined by almost 54 percent to 3064 (Figure No.2.06 and Table No.2F). More than half of the beggars enumerated in Kolkata were Muslims (Corporation of Calcutta, 1925).

2.08.07. Leper beggars
Leper beggars were a chronic social problem in the city. A scheme was proposed to erect a leper colony in the Medinipur district of Bengal Province was under consideration since 1921 but it never materialized. In the late 1920s it was estimated that there were about 3000 leper beggars in Kolkata and 100,000 in Bengal. They were attracted by the reported wealth of Kolkata and gathered together in colonies in some of the most congested part of the city, from where it was easier to ply their profession of begging. It was suggested to the Corporation that it should provide sanitary houses to these deprived people and charge them rents on the same scale as they have been paying in the city (Corporation of Calcutta, 1929).
2.08.08. Survey of beggars in 1932

Dr. E. Muir of The School of Tropical Medicine and his colleagues of The Leprosy Relief Association, Bengal Branch had conducted a survey in 1932 and 1933 in 5 Districts (consisting of 32 wards) of the Town (Muir, E., 1934). Out of an estimated figure of 4,000 beggars in the city in 1932-33, 3,011 beggars were surveyed. Most of the beggars had their origin in the rural districts of Bengal, and also from Bihar and Orissa (Figure No.2.07 and Table No.2G). Out of these 33.94 percent were diseased, 38.82 percent were unemployed without disease, and 27.23 percent were permanent professional beggars (Figure No.2.08 and Table No.2H). Seeing the deplorable condition of the beggars Dr. E. Muir was of opinion that some radical methods be adopted to solve this problem. It was estimated in 1930s that 4 out of 100 persons in Bengal lead a life of vagrancy (Muir, E., 1934).

2.08.09. Role of Rotary Club

In 1938 Dr. A. C. Uril of Rotary Club of Kolkata studied the beggar problem in Kolkata and felt that the menace had been steadily increasing in the city. It was felt by the Club that the various Institutions in the city who were directly or indirectly related to the solution of the problem should come up with a co-ordinate scheme. In the meantime Rotary Club with a few other organizations proposed a scheme to tackle this problem. Government of Bengal forwarded the scheme to Kolkata Corporation in February 1936. In the same year the Corporation appointed a special committee to consider the beggar problem. The Committee suggested that begging of able-bodied persons should be prosecuted and children under 16 should be sent to charitable homes and orphanage to be looked after and educated. For the aged poor, it was suggested that an almshouse should be provided. The Government of Bengal appointed a team to work out the practical details but nothing materialized out of it in spite of the Corporation’s willingness to bear a share of the expenditure (Uril, A. C., 1938).

2.08.10. All India Local Self Government Resolution

The much vexed beggar problem was discussed on 29th December 1938 at the All India Local Self Government held at Kolkata Corporation. The question of finding a proper solution to the problem did engage the attention of Municipal Bodies. It was evident that the matter was not
handled with that zeal and urgency that the problem demanded. It was perhaps for stringencies of finance and lack of organized public opinion. In connection it was resolved that it be recommended to the Central Government to examine the cause and effect of begging, develop a tentative scheme to protect infirm beggars and legislate uniform laws to penalize able-bodied professional beggars (Corporation of Calcutta, 1939).

2.08.11. Rotary Club and leper beggars

In 1943 Rotary Club studied the problem of leper beggars and formulated a scheme to handle the problem in a practical way. A proposal to establish a beggar leper colony was under consideration but the scheme failed since the beggars were unwilling to shift to this colony from where it would have been impossible to continue their profession of begging (Sen, P., 1943).

2.09. Bustees, the quarters of the poor: An integral part of Kolkata

2.09.01. The problem

Kolkata has grown haphazardly without any plan. The most outstanding problem of the city’s health has been the condition of the innumerable bustees in the city containing a huge proportion of the city’s total population. Bustees were interspersed with big houses and mansions in the city. It was created by the odd mixture of progress and lack of planning. The experience of bustee life was confined mainly in the northern part of colonial Kolkata where the Natives resided, but the general aspects of bustees were more or less same throughout the city during the pre-independence era. The dearth of space and the consequent high rents compelled the labourers and other poor working class to live in ill ventilated huts and insanitary single room dwelling, which had neither adequate accommodation nor privacy.

2.09.02. Origin of bustees

The origin of bustees in Kolkata goes back to the days after the Battle of Plassey (1757). The victory led to the growth of English business by gaining the political power of Bengal. As Kolkata began to grow with the expansion of trade and commerce, poor people from the adjacent countryside were attracted to the city by the prospect of getting employment. They settled mostly in the northern parts of the city. A sizable section of the poor labourers and servants of the company lived in huts close to the vicinity of the English residents. In course of time the hutments turned into bustees and thika tenants. In course of time civic facilities in the newly growing city were provided in gradual stages. The European part of the city had more civic facilities compared to the Native Kolkata. The people in the Non-European part lived in highly insanitary conditions and also in greater densities. This marked the beginning of the neglect of the bustee areas. As years rolled by the condition of the bustees deteriorated from bad to worse (Nair, P. T, 1989).
Chapter II: A Historical Sketch Of Poverty In Kolkata

2.09.03. Kutchha huts in the nineteenth century

In 1821 the number of thatched huts were more than twice of the tiled huts. The number of thatched huts declined considerably since then and tiled huts increased. With the abolition of thatched huts in 1837 there were practically no thatched huts after 1850 in the town (Figure No. 2.09 and Table No. 2.1). Tiled huts mostly replaced them.

2.09.04. Bad construction and irregularity of huts

Considering the condition of huts, according to the Administrative Report of 1875, not a single hut in the village was properly built. The dwellings were badly constructed, crowded together without regard to ventilation or the means of being kept clean. (Corporation of Calcutta, 1876).

2.09.05. Bustee clearance and bustee improvement in nineteenth century

The condition of bustees has been a subject of debate in the Corporation. Health officers argued that demolition and clearing of the bustees was the only solution to the problem. Bustees were often cleared to give space for construction of pucca houses in the cleared land or were alternatively used for commercial purpose.

2.09.06. Description of bustees in late nineteenth century

A bustee or 'native village' generally consisted of huts constructed without any plan or arrangement, without roads, without proper drains, ill ventilated and never cleaned. Most of these were abode of misery and refuse and the nurseries of sickness and disease. In these bustees were found green and slimy stagnant ponds, full of putrid vegetable and animal matter, which were in a state of decomposition. The arteries, which fed these tanks, were the drains that carried out the sewers into them. These ponds supplied the natives with water for domestic purpose and very often the receptacles of filth. The entrances to these bustees were many whilst the paths were narrow and tortuous. Many of the bustees were intersected by deep public ditches or drains, which received the drainage and sewage of the surrounding area and were in a most filthy condition (Corporation of Calcutta, 1875). Huts were huddled together in hovels, the community as a whole suffered as a result of such unhygienic condition. Not a single hut was properly built. The dwellings were badly constructed, crowded together without regard to ventilation or the means of being kept clean. Due to presence of very narrow lanes in the bustees conservancy was
impossible. In these huts often lived the entire family sharing a single room in which they lived, cooked, eat and slept in the same room (Corporation of Calcutta, 1876).

2.09.07. Bustee condition according to religious status in the late nineteenth century
Amongst the Hindus, the worst and the filthiest bustees were those occupied by gowallahs (milkmen), coloos (porters), chamars or muchees (cobblers). Amongst the Muslim Bustees, the worst were those occupied by the khallasees (porters) and gurrywans (Corporation of Calcutta, 1876).

2.09.08. Influence of caste system on bustees in late nineteenth century
The distinction of caste extended to the bustees but it assumed in some places a new form by the fact that some portions of them called ‘parrahs’ (neighborhoods) were inhabited by people of one occupation, or trade whose habits of living gave a distinctive feature to each ‘parrah’ and modified its general appearance (Corporation of Calcutta, 1876).

2.09.09. Unavailability of sufficient bustee statistics
Not much correct facts and figures regarding bustees and bustee population and areas of the bustees were available during the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century though there had been proposals from time to time to held a detailed survey of the bustees in the city. It seems that no systematic attempts were made to gather facts regarding the bustees. Hence very limited informative facts regarding bustees have been stated.

2.09.10. Bustee Census in 1876
There were 135 bustees in the city according to the 1876 census (Census of India 1876, 1878). Nearly 21 percent of the population in the city lived in 135 bustees with a sex ratio of 638 females / 1000 males. About 7 Wards had bustee population between 25 to 45 percent (Figure No.2.10 and Table No.2J), Ward No.1 (Shyampukur), Ward No.14 (Taltala) and Ward No.15 (Colinga) had the maximum number of bustees (approximately 11 percent of the total bustees in each wards). Ward No.12 (Waterloo street) had no bustees. Ward No.7 (Barabazar) had the least number of bustees. Ward No.2 (Kumartuli), Ward No.5 (Jorabagan), Ward No.6 (Jorasanko), Ward No.9 (Muchipara), Ward No.10 (Baubazar), Ward No.11 (Paddapukur) and Ward No.16 (Park Street) had 5-25 percent of the bustee population. Ward No.1 (Shyampukur), Ward No.3 (Burtala), Ward No.4 (Sukea Street), Ward No.8 (Colutala), Ward No.14 (Taltala), Ward No.15 (Colinga) and Ward No.17 (Baman Bustee) had 25-45 percent of bustee population. In
Ward No.18 (Hastings) Nearly 3.7 percent of the total bustees of the city housed almost 84 percent of the Ward population denoting a high concentration of bustee population in this Ward (Map No.2.01 and Table No.2K). Ward No.8 (Colutala) possessed a high (nearly 16 percent) concentration of bustee population out of the total bustee population.

**Map No. 2.01**

2.09.11. Bustee Census in 1880

In 1880 it was decided to treat a ‘bustee’ as a collection of huts standing on an area of not less than 2 bighas. The number of bustees in this category was 482 covering an area of 3,135 bighas (Corporation of Calcutta, 1881).

2.09.12. Effort of Corporation to improve bustees

Since the initiation of the new Corporation since 1924 nothing was done to improve the living condition of the bustees. In 1925 a sub-committee for dwelling houses for the poor and middle-


Chapter II: A Historical Sketch Of Poverty In Kolkata

class was formed to translate the ideas of Chittaranjan Das into practice. The Committee prepared models of houses and estimates of expenditure. The scheme never came into operation. Result was that one-third of the population still lived in miserable conditions. Especially in Ward no 19 and 20 bustees were neglected and the poor bustee dwellers remained completely in darkness (Corporation of Calcutta, 1927).

2.09.13. Bustees of 1930s

According to an author describing the bustees in 1939, ‘In the bustees the huts were huddled together in hovels, the community as a whole suffered as a result of extreme unhygienic condition.’ (Corporation of Calcutta, 1939). There were instances for example Haldar Bagan Bustee, where men and pigs lived together. The bustees practically surrounded the pig slaughterhouse. The pigs were bred in these bustees. The water tanks in these bustees were shared both by the pigs and the bustee dwellers. Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy as Mayor of Kolkata in 1932 stated that the residence of the poor were provided with no sewers and lights, ill supplied with water, filtered and unfiltered, were without roads and sanitary conveniences. The mayor could undertake little improvement work since the work was huge (Nair, P. T., 1989). According to Yakub, S. M. (1938), the bustees consisting of mud houses with loose tiles or thatched roof cannot be compared with the slums of foreign countries. They were often without windows or any means of ventilation. Absence of sanitation was evident from the heaps of garbage and pools of sewage around (Yakub, S. M., 1938).

2.09.14. Congestion in bustees

The congestion in these bustees, want of light and sanitation were beyond any description. According to the official figures of the Corporation in 1930 each person living in bustees had only 18 square feet or say 6 feet by 3 feet space to live, sleep and cook his food in (Corporation of Calcutta, 1930).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>No. of Bustees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>District I (including Kashipur, Chitpur)</td>
<td>1776</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>District II (including Maniktala)</td>
<td>1338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>District III</td>
<td>1280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>District IV (including Garden reach)</td>
<td>1333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>5727</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Corporation of Calcutta, 1930

2.09.15. Bustee statistics of 1930s

In 1931 out of the total population of 1,149,684 in the city of Kolkata, 2,60,447 lived in bustees, that is, almost 22.65 percent of the total population lived in bustees (Sanyal, S. C., 1933). During 1930-39 overcrowding in bustees were further aggravated. When the war broke out there was a
sharp rise in population of Greater Kolkata. Accommodation and shelter was naturally limited in the City. Out of 32 Wards almost 6 percent of the Wards had 300 to 425 bustees. Where the concentration of bustees was high in Ward Nos.28 (Beleghata) and 29 (Maniktala) respectively. In 1930 there were about 5,727 bustees in the City (Corporation of Calcutta, 1930). The distribution of the bustees in the city is shown in Table No.2.01 respectively.

2.09.16. Ward wise variation of bustee density in 1937-38

In 1937-38 the Bustee Section was directed to make a survey of the bustees particularly those with an area of 10 cottahs and above. There were 2685 such premises, which covered approximately 5839 bighas. The number of huts standing on them was 45,745. According to the estimate of the Bustee Department on the basis of the data gathered in 1937-38 the bustee population was a little over 4 lakhs (Yakub, S. M., 1938). The Ward wise variation of bustee density revealed the following picture:-

- 4 Wards (12 percent of the Wards) contained no bustees.
- 5 Wards (15.6 percent of the Wards) had a density of below 100 bustees.
- 21 Wards (65 percent of the Wards) had a density of between 100 to 300 bustees
- 2 Wards (6.25 percent of the Wards) had a density of between 300 to 450 bustees

(Figure No. 2.11 and Table No.2.01).

2.09.17. Bustees of 1940s

In 1941, the then Mayor of Kolkata, Mr. Siddiqui realized that the bustees were pestering sores of the civic body for decades which were unfit for human habitation. He urged the bustee owners to come forward and take a definite step to eliminate bustees as well as the degraded living conditions (Siddiqui, S., 1941). In 1944-45, the Bustee Section of the Kolkata Corporation prepared a census of the number of huts and population living in bustees. According to the Bustee Section this number was 2,256. But according to the Assessment Records of the Corporation there were altogether 4,636 bustees in Kolkata with an approximate area of 5,454 bighas, which gave a much more reliable figure of the bustees in the city as stated by the Corporation (Corporation of Calcutta, 1945).
2.09.18. Assessment of bustees
The number of Municipal holdings described and assessed as bustees had increased between 1924 and 1930 but steadily decreased from 1934 onwards. In the decades following the year 1924, the increase in the number of bustees seems to have been due to fragmentation of holdings (Figure No.2.12 and Table No.2M). The decline in the number in the following decade seems to have been largely due to utilization of bustees for alternative purpose by conversion of bustee lands (Corporation of Calcutta, 1944).

2.10. Condition of bustees

2.10.01. Sanitation
Prior to the appointment of The Royal Army Sanitary Commission of 1859 sanitation had been neglected in Bengal. There were no sanitary commissioners, health officer, or sanitary inspector. The publication of the Army Sanitary Commission’s Report in 1863 had an immediate effect. The Health Officer of Kolkata was appointed (Corporation of Calcutta, 1876). Absence of sanitation was evident from heaps of garbage and pools of sewage around, the result of improper or open latrines that fouled the air and soil (Yakub, S. M., 1938).

2.10.02. Role of the bustee landlords
The foremost defect of the bustees were not only due to ignorance and utter disgrace of the bustee dwellers but also due to the negligence of the proprietors who cared very little about their tenants, provided that their rents were paid regularly. In early 1940s the official felt that it was high time that the bustee-dwellers should be made to feel the benefit of hygiene, the greater number of them being poor and ignorant (Bhar, H., 1945).

2.10.03. Impact of drainage improvement
According to the Health Officer’s report in 1875, with the extension of the drainage work there had been a regressive movement in the sanitary condition of the city. Not a single bustee was drained and filthy ditches were kept open. The bustee dwellers failed to derive the full benefit of drainage improvements (Corporation of Calcutta, 1876).

2.10.04. Bustees and epidemics
In the late 1800s and early 1900s there had been outbreak of epidemics in the city’s bustees, which was due to insanitary conditions in the bustees. The whole organization of the sanitary condition of the Corporation was desperately inefficient to control it. From the sanitary survey of Kolkata in 1865, it was evident that cholera was raging in the neighbourhoods of the bustees occupied by the gowallahs (milkmens) (Corporation of Calcutta, 1874). For instance in 1927 there were about 150 bustees in Ward No 1, whose health statistics confirmed that disease was as more
rampant and child mortality astonishingly higher in them than in areas elsewhere (Tagore, S., 1927). Filthy open drains ran right through the heart of the bustees, which remained unclean for ages. Darkness was one of the most serious sanitary defects and it rendered many bustee dwellings unfit for human habitation.

2.10.05. Want of public latrines

One of the causes of unhealthiness in the bustees was the want of public latrine accommodation. The latrines that existed had no sewage facility and were kutchha. They were without any trap doors and no arrangement for the flow of soiled water from the privies existed. The accumulation of night soil in these latrines was incredible which was very seldom removed. The Health Officers were surprised to find that population could live in the vicinity of such filthy places where decency and cleanliness were so little regarded. These bustee latrines were a fruitful source of danger to the inmates. Malaria and cholera was no stranger here (Corporation of Calcutta, 1873).

2.10.06. Scavenging and conservancy in bustees

The bustees consisted of very narrow and winding lanes, which rendered proper scavenging inside the bustee practically impossible. This led to the accumulation of filth and garbage within the bustee (Corporation of Calcutta, 1873).

2.10.07. Health status of bustees

The insanitary condition of the bustees had been a serious problem to the health of the city. There had been instances of occurrence and spread of various infectious diseases in the insanitary bustees. The Health Officer’s Report of 1942-43 highlighted that the health problem regarding the city was its innumerable insanitary bustees. These bustees played a significant role in maintenance of the city’s health standard. Various efforts had been made but the nature of the problem had been so vast that it failed (Corporation of Calcutta, 1943).

2.11. Bustee improvement work

2.11.01. Bustee improvement in early nineteenth century

Bustee improvement works had been carried out to some extent during the early nineteenth century, when the British took up the task of remodeling the city. Structural improvements of the bustees were carried out like opening up of bustee roads, land acquisition and reconstruction. A few had been almost rebuilt on improved lines, a few others had been remodeled, others demolished to give away space for town improvements and many remained neglected in filthy insanitary conditions. In many instance it was found that the bustees occupying expensive sites
in business and residential areas were demolished and often converted into residential mansions or used for commercial purpose.

2.11.02. Bustee improvements in the late nineteenth century
In 1872 the Health Officer of Kolkata drew the attention to the extremely filthy condition of the bustees, which he stated had not undergone the slightest improvement since 1868 (Corporation of Calcutta, 1873). In 1874 owing to the remarks made by the Army Sanitary Commission in England regarding the state of bustees in Kolkata, the Government of Bengal urged prompt measures being adopted. Certain bustees of the Northern Division of the Town were surveyed and remedies for improvements were proposed. The reforms required the demolition of all existing huts and their reconstruction on a proper and regular plan (Corporation of Calcutta, 1875). The Administrative Report of 1877 stated that the whole question of bustee improvement was a matter of time and money. Formulation of new Municipal Law had enlarged the powers of the Corporation to deal with them. In 1877-1878 subject of bustee reform involved conservancy and reconstruction of huts to improve ventilation (Corporation of Calcutta, 1878). In 1889-1880 it identified making roads through bustees and filling up of the insanitary water tanks as two chief improvements required in bustees (Corporation of Calcutta, 1880).

2.11.03. Law regarding bustee improvement
2.11.03.01. Sanitary measures
According to the amended Act of 1863 the then Corporation had the powers to compel bustee owners to carry out reasonable sanitary measures in the bustee. If the owners failed to do so it was considered as an offence and often they were punished (Corporation of Calcutta, 1873).

2.11.03.02. Abolition of hut construction
As tenants were generally too poor to undertake any expensive sanitary improvements and landlords were unwilling to help them in this matter bustee hut construction were practically abolished. In the early decade of twentieth century the land on which they were situated had either been laid bare or masonry buildings had been constructed upon them. For instance during 1910-11 huts had been completely removed from 28 bighas of bustee land (Corporation of Calcutta, 1911). Similarly during 1912-13 huts had been completely removed from 28 bighas of insanitary bustee land (Corporation of Calcutta, 1913).

2.11.04. Role of Kolkata Improvement Trust in the early twentieth century
The Kolkata Improvement Trust that came into being in 1910 was responsible for clearing most of the bustees by driving wide roads through them by demolishing bustees. During the development work of the Trust many bustee people have been de-housed by its operation. The net result had been driving the poor bustee dwellers from inhabitable to uninhabitable swampy areas of the city fringe where no amenities existed. Since then the question regarding the housing geography of urban poverty in the city of Kolkata
for the poor was raised. On 21st August 1919 the Corporation appointed a special committee to consider the question of providing --

(i) sanitary dwellings to the poorest class,
(ii) sanitary buildings for the moderate mass.

A scheme was prepared for the construction of a building consisting of 756 rooms in 153 blocks. Each room was to accommodate four persons and thus a total of about 2,500 persons were to be accommodated. Later the scheme was modified and placed before the General Committee on 22nd July 1922. Real intention of the scheme was to provide accommodation to the poorer class. But Section 394 of the Kolkata Municipal Act, 1899 provided provision for the erection of sanitary dwellings for the poorer classes only. This prevented a difficulty in the execution of the scheme. So the scheme was postponed till the New Act which provides such a provision was passed. But later the scheme was never taken into consideration (Ray Choudhury S. C, 1928).

2.11.05. Role of Kolkata Corporation

In the Corporation Act of 1899, provisions were made for housing the poor. In 1901, a block of masonry building called the 'Green Model Bustee' was erected in Lansdowne Road (presently called Elgin Road) at the cost of the owner of the bustee. But these buildings not being suitable for the purpose of residence was demolished after a few years. On 10th August 1904, the Corporation appointed a Special Committee to consider the question of erection of Model Dwellings. A plot of Corporation land to the west of Haritala Road was selected and a scheme was duly prepared. The scheme was considered unsatisfactory and eventually dropped on the recommendation of the Special Committee (Roy Choudhury K.C., 1927). The subject of bustee improvement had long been a statutory obligation of the Corporation of Kolkata. Originally bustees were in charge of the City Architect till the beginning of the twentieth century. It was not until the evolution of the new corporation in 1923 that organized work of bustee improvement was taken up seriously. 'Better sanitation in bustees' was the fifth item in the nine-fold programme laid down in 1923 in taking up the work of the new Corporation. The idea that inspired the then Mayor was the services towards the poor. According to the Corporation, the problem was so complex that it had to be approached from 4 distinct standpoints:

- public health
- hygiene
- town planning and
- public morals

2.11.06. Importance of bustee improvement work

The subject of bustee improvement had been referred to in almost every Annual Report of Kolkata and the urgent necessity for radical reforms in the condition of bustees was strongly urged on each occasion. The Municipal Administrative Report of 1875 stated that it was the duty
of the Justices in the interest of the public in general to employ every means in their power to carry out efficient sanitary measures for the preservation of public health. Till the bustees were cleared and reconstructed upon a proper plan with due regard to drainage, ventilation, and hygiene, no permanent improvements in the sanitary condition nor any alleviation of the suffering and misery of the poorer classes could be visualized. Replacement of the bustee huts with sanitary dwellings for the poorer and working class at minimum cost was the fundamental problem of Kolkata (Corporation of Calcutta, 1876).

2.11.07. Critical assessment of bustee improvement work

The British Government of India and Bengal who had their habitation in Kolkata for decades neglected the city hygienically and from the point of view of public health and cleanliness. The Corporation, before 1923, followed the same tradition of improvements of areas inhabited by the richer section of the population. The chosen representatives of the people, under the new Act of 1923, continued the same tradition. They equally neglected the duty towards the poorer section of the population who lived under conditions unfit for human habitation.

2.12. Conclusion

2.12.01. Municipal growth and city development

With the inclusion of the added areas on 1st April 1924 Greater Kolkata came into being. The inclusion of the added areas raised the population of the city from 9,07,851 to 1,077,264. But a city cannot grow merely by addition of areas. They are more likely to become a burden to the city with course of time. This has been the case of Kolkata where the added areas of Garden Reach, Kashipur-Chitpur and Maniktala have not been really helpful in releasing the congestion of the proper Kolkata city. Instead the insanitary bustees, lack of drains and roads etc in the added area remained as a problem, which added on to the existing problems of the old city and could not be solved. In the 1940s the boundaries of the city remained unchanged. Population had swelled up from about 20 lakhs to 40 lakhs. Bustees were beyond capacity. The city started feeling the pressure of excess population.

2.12.02. Sustaining problem of poverty

Though actual figures of poverty in the pre-independence period were never recorded the empirical facts regarding the condition of the poor bustee-dwellers and homeless vagrants were sufficient to reveal their status. It is very true that the British rule through its plunder and exploitation had rapidly transformed Bengal’s economy, which had its effect on the urban structure of Kolkata. The growth of Kolkata during 200 years of foreign rule appears to symbolize the process of ruination of Bengal as a whole. With the inception of the Municipality in Kolkata in 1727, multiple plans have been drawn to tackle the problem of bustees and the
homeless vagrants in the city. Alongside town improvement was accompanied by eviction of huts pushing the poor to the swampy fringes of the city. As the city grew it became infested with growing slums pockets in every ward of the city. In the interest of the trade and business activities in the city, the Corporation could not drive the bustee-dwellers out of the city. Dream Projects like 'Green Model Bustee', Leper Colony, Alms-House for the disabled vagrants and so on proved to be unsuccessful as most of these were not even implemented. Also the poor of Kolkata were very much fragmented by religion, caste and language. They could never organize themselves into one section of the society to address their complaints, protest against exploitation or ask for improvement in their living conditions. Many of these poor had looked upon the city as 'a place of earning money'. Without any basic amenities, they lived in substandard living conditions unfit for human dwelling. These bustees and squatters have been the discrete pockets of poverty. At the time of independence in 1947 it was left in the hands of the Corporation of Kolkata of 'Independent India' to deal with the socio-economic problem of poverty in the metropolis.

References


