CHAPTER II

The Environment of Government

For a better appreciation of the governmental problems of the Calcutta Metropolitan District, it is necessary to draw a pen picture of the environment of government. The physical environment and geographic constraints, the demographic base and economic forces, have important bearing on the government of the Metropolitan District, and many of the problems which the municipal institutions in the District have been facing can be meaningfully related to these basic constraints and forces. For the sake of convenience, the environmental situation is discussed under three broad sub-divisions viz., geography, demography and economy. ¹

Geography

Urban growth in the CMD has taken a peculiarly linear pattern along both banks of the Hooghly. The chain of jute mills that had grown up in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries along the river banks depended greatly on water transport, and in fact in the early days of Calcutta's growth the river proved to be a very important artery of trade. Later, the major road and rail transportation lines were laid along the river banks contributing thereby to the linear growth of the conurbation flowing from the two cities of Calcutta and Howrah on the east bank and the west bank respectively. Nature dictated an important way the pattern

¹. The Basic Development Plan of the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organization contains a wealth of information on the environmental situation. Also, the C.M.P.O prepared from time to time informative handbooks on the CMD's demographic facts, economy and geography.
of human settlements in the Calcutta metropolitan area. Due to the deposition of alluvial silt by the river along its banks, a natural levee of habitable highland can be found mainly near the river, and as one moves away from the banks the land level falls sharply, posing immense difficulties for large scale settlements.

On the east bank, Calcutta's spatial growth is severely restricted by large areas of malarial marshes and the salt lakes, which are situated quite close to the city. Similarly, on the west bank periodic flooding and drainage problems have stood in the way of physical expansion beyond Howrah and its contiguous municipalities.

Topographical constraints have led to an amazing congestion of human habitation in the CMD where over six million people live in an area of only about 135 square miles, which constitute the developed land within the metropolitan area. Increasing population growth coincided with the intensification of search for suitable living space. As Table 6 in Chapter IX shows, during 1951-61 the suburban towns of Calcutta, such as North Dum Dum, South Dum Dum, Panthali and South suburban, witnessed tremendous population increase, and Calcutta itself grew only by about 8 per cent. Even low-lying and unwatered areas within the city in Kasba, Tangra, Topsia and Tollygunge, where in normal circumstances human settlement would not have come up, registered fast growth as people wanted to live as near as possible to their work places in Calcutta. On the Howrah side also, considerable suburban growth took place in Bally, Kotrung and Baidyabati. It has been estimated that the
CMB has about 300 square miles of unbuilt or sparsely settled land, of which 104 square miles are low and marshy and 196 square miles constitute high or moderately high land suitable for urban development (Fig. 2). The latter class of land is, however, scattered throughout the metropolitan area, and a sizeable concentration of such land can be found near Bansberia and Kalyan on the extreme north. Obviously, desirable urban growth has to be directed in a planned way toward the more habitable areas. Meanwhile, urban settlements go on unchecked in predominantly low-lying areas, where it will be extremely difficult to provide essential civic services such as water-supply, drainage and sewerage. The Calcutta area's average annual rainfall is 64 inches, 80 per cent of which takes place during the four months of the monsoon when streets and the low-lying areas within and outside the city get flooded. The flat topography of the metropolitan area makes the drainage problem difficult and, to add to its misery, almost all the natural drainage systems provided by small rivers and streams have been deteriorating very fast in the CMB. Thus, the metropolitan area seems to be growing in defiance of the topographical constraints and the dictates of nature.

Demography

The CMB, according to the 1961 census estimates, has over 6 million population which includes Calcutta city's population of nearly 3 million. As shown, Table 6 in Chapter IX, during 1951-61, Calcutta's population grew only by 3.47 per cent and
Howrah's by 18.21 per cent. But, the neighbouring towns registered high increases, demonstrating thereby recent growth trends in the suburban areas of Calcutta and Howrah. Population growth in the CMD is attributable to natural increase and in-migration. The present annual volume of population growth through natural increase is approximately 1,65,000 and the annual net in-migration is about 58,000. The migrants in the CMD fall into two broad classes: the refugees from East Pakistan, and other job-seekers from the hinterland and far-off places in India.

The migration data for the city of Calcutta point out that during 1951-61, 1,83,000 came from Bihar alone followed by 71,000 from Uttar Pradesh, 33,000 from Orissa, 24,000 from Western India, 14,000 from South India, 5,000 from Bengal, and 45,000 from other parts of the country. Out of these as many as 2,28,000 refugees came from East Pakistan during this census decade. These different streams, with their diverse ways of living and distinct language affiliations, contribute to the heterogeneity of Calcutta's population. A large number of in-migrants came to the city in search of jobs leaving their wives and children in their native places. Aside from the refugees, the in-migrants are therefore mostly adult males which fact leads to the distortion of the age-sex structure of Calcutta and the CMD. To most of the job seekers from different parts of the country, metropolitan Calcutta is a place to eke out a living. The city does not belong to them and they do not belong to the city. To quote

from the Basic Development Plan. The great majority remain outsiders—sleeping on the pavements or huddled in male 'messing families' in ramshackle bustee huts, on jute lines, in conditions of appalling insanitation; or living and sleeping, inside the shops and offices, hotels, docks, factories, or construction sites where they work. They consider their stay in the city as essentially temporary, dominated by the hard struggle to survive, to save whatever part of their earnings they can, to send to their families in the village home." The condition of the refugees is no better, as many of them huddle in insanitary bustees and engage in petty trades to maintain their families. Still now, there are 149 refugee colonies within the CMD with 26,000 households, and their living conditions are equally poor and insanitary. In their struggle for bare means of subsistence, the refugees, like other job-seekers, grow little attachment to the city. The slums or bustees remain the heart of the city due sheerly to the economic conditions of their dwellers. The improvised hawkers' stalls, the familiar roadside shops grow up in many places flouting municipal laws. Essential civic services fail to cope with ever increasing demands and from all accounts it appears as though metropolitan Calcutta has been used to living in perennial crisis situations.

Economy

Metropolitan Calcutta's economic importance lies in its

being the main producer and distributor of goods and services for a vast hinterland which is rich in mineral and natural resources and agricultural production. Within a radius of 300 miles and in the immediate hinterland of Calcutta are situated some of India's important industrial towns such as Jamshedpur, Rourkela, Bumpur, Burdaspur, Asansol, Chittaranjan and Ranchi (Fig. 3). These industrial centres are linked with Calcutta by a chain of rail, road and air-communications, and these look to the city and port of Calcutta for important services. In 1964 the port cleared 42 per cent of India's total exports and received 35 per cent of the country's total imports. The Metropolitan District accounts for nearly 15 per cent of all-India's manufacture and handles nearly 30 per cent of value of India's bank clearances. It has been estimated that the per capita income in the CMD is more than twice the all-India average, and West Bengal as a whole has the highest per capita income among the States in the eastern region. This explains the irresistible flow of migrants into the CMD from the neighbouring States of West Bengal. So far as West Bengal is concerned, the CMD dominates the economy of the State. More than half of the total income generated in the State are created in the south-eastern districts of the State which include the CMD, and according to the 1961 census estimates, total volume of employment in the CMD stood at 2.4 million. Table 1 gives the sector-wise break down of employment
in the Metropolitan District. It can be seen that the tertiary sector dominates the employment scene. This is in conformity with the tremendous importance of Calcutta as the commercial, financial and trades centre of a wide region. The preponderance of the tertiary sector is also explainable by the large influx of unskilled labour into the CMD from other parts of West Bengal and from the neighbouring States. At the same time, the CMD has a staggering load of unemployment. "One conservative estimate based on census data shows that at the very minimum 1,70,000 people were directly unemployed in 1961. It has been further estimated that approximately 3,30,000 recorded as employees were actually employed on a marginal, part-time basis." These figures show the dark side of the CMD. Its economy has failed to absorb a sizeable population, which accounts to a great extent for the socio-political tensions and unrest that have become characteristic features of life in the CMD.

4. The Basic Development Plan, op. cit., p. 34
Urban Living Conditions

A brief sketch of the condition of essential urban services would explain the quality of general urban living situation in the CMD. To start with, housing, both in terms of quantity and quality, is a formidable problem in the metropolitan area, especially in Calcutta, where it was estimated that in 1957, 77 percent of the families had less than 40 square feet of living space per capita. A very low estimate puts the figure of the houseless pavement dwellers in Calcutta at 30,000. Where housing units exist, a majority of these units do not have even the basic amenities. Deficiency in educational facilities is equally disconcerting. Apart from secondary and technical education in which the CMD's record is not altogether depressing, primary education and junior secondary education have not made much headway so much so that in 1961, about 32 percent of children in the primary age-group (6 to 10) did not receive any primary education at all, and 56 percent received no junior secondary education. Of the other urban services, drainage and sewerage and water supply need special mention. From the public health standpoint, these services are of tremendous importance in metropolitan Calcutta. Because of heavy rainfall during the monsoon, drainage system is particularly important, but the CMD has very little natural drainage and haphazard urban growth has further accentuated the problem by choking many of the former drainage outfalls. Most of the CMD area:
do not have good drainage and sewerage. Even in Calcutta, only 54 per cent of the city area is sewered, and excepting Kalyani, which has a modern sewerage system and the marginal systems in Serampore, Bhatsara and Titagarh, nowhere in the CMD can be found any sewerage system at all. In other words, most parts of the CMD have the dry conservancy type of night-soil disposal which naturally poses a potent health hazard in the congested metropolitan area.

Inadequacy of safe water supply is another big problem in the Metropolitan District. During 1964-65, Calcutta's per capita supply of filtered water was 28.0 gallons a day. The corresponding figures during 1931-32, 1941-42 and 1950-51 were 52.3, 34.5 and 26.5 respectively. Thus, a decline in supply over the years is clearly noticeable. Only the Kalyani township has a continuous supply of 40 gallons per day; other municipalities have an average supply of barely 12.3 gallons per head per day, and the rest of the CMD do not have any public water supply system. To add to the misery of the CMD, the River Hooghly, which is the life line of the metropolitan area and which constitutes the main source of potable water for Calcutta and a few other neighbouring municipalities, has been deteriorating because of a shift in the flow of the River Ganges whose distributory is the Bhagirathi-Hooghly system. The deterioration of the river poses a serious threat to the Calcutta port and thus to the vast hinterland it serves. So far as water supply to the
city is concerned, the increasing salinity of the Hooghly is already affecting seriously the pumping operations of Calcutta's main water works at Palta. Thus, the urban environment of the CMD presents a gloomy picture with problems piling up every day. Chronic deficiencies in the essential urban services, congestion and squalor, unemployment and unrest seem to have made a compromise with life in metropolitan Calcutta, and it is this environmental framework within which the urban local institutions under study operate.