GROWTH, DECLINE AND DISAPPEARANCE OF SUKHSAGUR

Sukhsagur or the "Chota Calcutta" (Little Calcutta), as it widely came to be known towards the close of the 18th century, was a pleasure resort of the Europeans in Bengal. In the second edition of Hamilton's "The East India Gazetteer" published in 1828 Sukhsagur was described as "a small town in the province of Bengal, District of Nadia, about thirty-one miles north from Calcutta". But Bishop Heber on his journey to Dacca from Calcutta in 1824, observed Sukhsagur as a village having only two or three brick-houses and a small low tower attached to one of them - resembling villages in England. This shows that the decline of Sukhsagur, had started already in 1824, for the urban features of Sukhsagur, situated just on the bank of the Bhagirathi, could not have escaped the notice of the Bishop who was travelling by river. When Colesworthy Grant, the author of "Rural Life in Bengal", visited Sukhsagur in about the year 1854, it had become 'a place of historical interest'.

"Chota Calcutta" of the late 18th century, and a growing town of the early 19th century, had fallen in decay before the first quarter of the 19th century was out, and after another quarter of a century it became a place of "historical interest".
No precise information is available to indicate the original importance of Sukhsagur. If the description of "Nadia Kahini" is accepted as true Sukhsagur would appear to be a place of some importance in 1757, for there lived Mr. George Barretto who fired in honour of Clive when the latter was proceeding towards Plassey. The story becomes plausible if we assume some relation between George Barretto and the celebrated Joseph Barretto who claimed in 1798 to have come to Bengal more than thirty years ago. Sukhsagur surely possessed some importance in the early decades of the second half of the 18th century for otherwise it is difficult to explain why Warren Hastings selected Sukhsagur as the place of his country-house.

Hastings built here his garden-house in 1772. In "Oriental Researches" Forbes writes, it was "an elegant house of European architecture, highly finished, and the grounds disposed with great tastes". An enthusiast for farming and gardening, Hastings founded an experimental farm at Sukhsagur for the cultivation of coffee, sugar cane, cinnamon and barleywheat. Hastings also secured from England honey suckle and sweet briar seeds and acclimatised them in his gardens. Mrs. Hastings - Hastings' second wife Marian - loved to stay at Sukhsagur and Hastings would frequently pay her flying visits from Calcutta in the "State Feelchera" or in Marian's pinance "The Mary". Often he would retire to Sukhsagur to remove the strains of acrimonious debates in the Council.
Towards the close of his long official career in India when all sorts of accusations were being levied against him in England, and rumours of his impending dismissal from office spread in India, Hastings became a dejected man, sick in body and mind. He took a long leave from the Council in 1784 and planned a trip to 'Up-country'. From Calcutta he first started for Sukhsagur. In a letter to Marian then in England, he wrote, "When I landed at Sukhsagur on the 19th (Feb.) my breath failed me, and my knees trembled with the walk to Croftes's bungalow." He decided to remain at Sukhsagur until he was quite recovered, but the good air, the pleasant surroundings and the happy memories of Marian's association with the Sukhsagur House, made him well almost immediately. On the 23rd February he was writing to his wife, "I wrote to you on the 19th from Sukhsagur, I began to mend on that day, and the next I was perfectly well, and have continued so increasing in strength to this day ... I have found out a method to see and converse with you whenever I sleep, if I choose it, and I have had your company every night for these four nights past". On return from his journey upcountry, Hastings made up his mind to pass the rest of his days in India at Sukhsagur. But Mr. Stable, a member of the Council, called on him on 4th November with urgent despatches from England and Hastings had to hurry back to Calcutta to his "gloomy mansion" there. Sukhsagur, in Hastings' time, became associated with many historical incidents and personalities. Mohan Prasad who brought charges of forgery against Nanda Kumar was induced to do so in
the garden house of Hastings. Wheler who succeeded Monson in the Council retired to Sukhsagur to recover his health but died there on 8th October 1784.

Sukhsagur should be remembered as the place where the first attempt at plantation on the scale of the West Indies was made in India. The Society of Merchants was formed in 1776 for making sugar plantation and distilleries. The member of this Society were Charles Croftes, David Killican, Johan Ferguson, Charles Grant and John Robertson. Hastings, too, made his investment in it.

The Society obtained from the Government permission to own 10,000 bighas of land and Maharaja Krishna Chandra Roy of Nadia promised a grant of the same quantity. Two pattahs were granted at the beginning, one for 200 bighas granted in perpetuity and the other for 5800 bighas for the term of forty years. The Society faced an immense task because of its ignorance of the practice in the West Indies and because of the unfertile nature of the soil at Sukhsagur. But it spared no pains to make the scheme a success. In the language of the merchants, "we have employed European overseers acquainted with the methods practised in the West Indies.

"We have introduced Chinese planters.

"We have commissioned from Europe a variety of workmen and machines.

"We are erecting all necessary buildings and works.

"We have employed monthly in clearing the land about 600 men, in other branches about 100."
"And although we are so much impeded, we have now nearly 600 bighas (for which only we could get plants in the proper season) in canes, which have a fair appearance of coming into perfection ... our outlay to the present time amounts to nearly Rupees 70,000 and before we realize anything, may increase to 1,50,000 rupees". The Society was conscious of the effects of the failure of their scheme for in that case, "others are not likely to make such an attempt", and craved for certain concessions from the Government. The Committee of Revenue while exempting import duties on Society's sugar, pepper, cotton, indigo and other articles "not now produced in Bengal", directed it to "occupy only waste land and not Ryotty land as the object of the Board was to promote the cultivation or improvement of articles not now produced or not brought to perfection in Bengal".

But in spite of all the efforts of the Society and the concessions granted by the Government, its scheme failed, mainly, because "the soil was so unfit for the culture of sugar canes." Charles Croftes, one of the members of the Society, purchased the whole estate to prosecute further the original scheme as well as to make new attempts at manufacturing "muslims" at Sukhsagur.

Croftes solicited from the government the completion of the original grant of 10,000 bighas by allowing him to hold 4,000 additional bighas of land contiguous to his works. The Governor-General in Council directed the Committee of Revenue to write to the Zamindar of Nadia, Maharaja Shib Chandra Roy. "We are sensible of the great expense which
Mr. Croftes must have been at in erecting buildings for the sugar works at Sukhsagur as well as of the advantage in improving the country and manufactures and encouraging the inhabitants to settle at that part; it therefore merits every encouragement from us and ... we direct that should it not interfere with the rights of others you will grant him a pattah in the customary manner. Shib Chandra granted two pattahs - one for 3008 bighas and the other for the island opposite to Sukhsagur. The lease was for thirty-three years so as to expire with the terms of 6000 bighas granted seven years before. Here are a few lines from Shib Chandra's grants to Croftes:

"I have given you this pattah for 33 years. You are to pay the Malguzaree thereof at Krishnagar in sicca rupees. You must settle ryots of other zamindaries on your ground. I will demand no more malguzaree than is stipulated in the pattah. The profit and loss of the farm is your own".

After the Famine of 1770, the peasants were continually migrating from one district to another to avoid assessment and the Zamindars were competing with each other to attract tenants from other Zamindars. The roving masses of landless men were easily attracted to Sukhsagur which held prospects of gainful employment. Sukhsagur thrived as an industrial estate and Mr. George Foster, the author of "A Journey from Bengal to England" who visited Sukhsagur in 1782 recorded in his book.
"On the 23rd of May (1782), I left Calcutta and on the next day arrived at Sukhsagur, a valuable and rising plantation, the property of Messrs Croftes and Lennox. These gentlemen have established at this place, a fabrication of white cloth, of which the Company provides an annual investment of about two lacs of rupees. They have also founded a raw silk manufactory, which, as it bears the appearance of increase and improvement, will, I hope, reward the industrious and estimable labours of its proprietors. In this plantation, a large quantity of spirituous liquors is made, resembling in an inferior degree, the American run, which, since the commencement of the Dutch War, has become in great demand".

The population at Sukhsagur had increased rapidly and for the workers, the weavers and the artisans, Croftes had established a "Gunge" (market) and then urged the Government to grant him a sanad for the same for "it (the market) is most essentially necessary for supplying the number of weavers and others who are there employed and who cannot daily quit their labours and go to a Bazar at a distance for the purpose providing themselves with the necessaries". The Committee of Revenue complied with the following perwannah:

"Be it known to the Beoparies, Goldars, Dookandars etc. of the Gunge of Sukhsagur - where as the above Gunge has been established by Mr. Charles Croftes, you have received permission from the Company to import goods into the said Gunge, also for the purchase and sale of all kinds of merchandise there; you may therefore of your own free will either purchase or sell all kinds of goods at the said Gunge paying customary
duties. You are to consider the above gentleman as the proprietor of the said Gunge. You will also attend to his just orders. The above gentleman has also been directed to use the Beoparies, Goldars etc. of the said Gunge with kindness, which will be 'the means of its enlargement, and to exact no more than the customary duties, to protect you from all injustices. You will consider and pay due attention to the above order" - Dated 21st March, 1785. In the midst of general disorder and lawlessness of the time, Sukhsagur assured protection to the merchants and craftsmen who clustered to the place from all parts of the country, and within a very short time, Sukhsagur became a huming town, an industrial-commercial colony in the midst of an agricultural surrounding.

But Charles Croftes was more of a success socially than professionally. The whole venture of manufacturing muslins brought him on the verge of bankruptcy and all on a sudden he sold his Sukhsagur Estate to Joseph Barretto in April 1785 for two lakhs of rupees.

Joseph Barretto, the new owner of the Sukhsagur estate, was "an Asiatic, born at Bombay of the Maratha Tribe." Although his ancestors had been of Roman Catholic persuasion, for a hundred years they had kept themselves unconnected with any Europeans whatsoever in point of intermarriage. A scholarly person Barretto was connected with the Hindu College as the treasurer of its local committee. Founder of a big Agency House at Calcutta and owner of a number of indigo works, Barretto usually lived with his relatives at
Sukhsagur. His reputation for wealth was so great that the local people believed he could transmute base metals into gold. He founded there a Roman Catholic Church and built roads and planted "neem" trees on both sides of them. It was in his time that the place came to be called "Chota Calcutta" and Europeans from all parts of the country came here on pleasure trips and entertainments.

Under Barretto's efficient management industries expanded rapidly, especially the manufacture of spirits and the "Gunge" grew in prosperity. Annual Sair collection from the market increased to Rupees ten thousand in 1790 from Rupees six thousand in 1785. After the abolition of Sair in 1790, Barretto furnished particulars of his collections at Sukhsagur from 1785 to 1790 to make claims for compensation. Here are some details of collection:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Duties on articles sold in the Gunge levied at the time of sale from the vendors at fixed rate</td>
<td>8,541-6-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duty levied on imports at a certain rate per cent on their value</td>
<td>32,372-4-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent derived from the ferry</td>
<td>1,162-0-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax paid by boatmen for the exclusive privilege of keeping boats to convey passengers from one place to another to a short distance at night</td>
<td>65-0-0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Duty paid by the ryots on articles produced by themselves when they sell these at their own house ... 84-2-5

Mehal Selamee paid by the vendors for the exclusive privilege of selling particular articles such as betels, salt etc. in the Gunge ... 1,195-0-0

Gunjah mehal tax paid for the exclusive privilege of selling 'bhang' ... 279-0-0

Total collection ... 49,966-1-7

Though the rates of sair collection are not known, the figures of collection indicate brisk economic activity at the place. Barretto's claim for compensation was admitted, an annual compensation of rupees eight thousand four hundred and eightynine, and three annas, one gundah was granted to him during the term of pattahs for Sukhsagur lands. 39

Under the Permanent Settlement, the Rajah of Nadia was frequently in arrear of revenue. Portions of his zamindary were continuously advertised for sale, sometimes the Rajah himself sold privately parts of his lands to meet the arrear. Barretto, apprehending that the new land-lords might not honour his pattahs, implored the Governor General in Council to safeguard his interests in case of sale of the Parganah Ookra, in which Sukhsagur was situated. The Governor-General afforded some relief by instructing the Collector of Nadia in 1806 "so long as there may be other lands of the Rajah, it would be inexpedient to sell Sukhsagur" 40 and again in 1810 "claims of
Barretto should be inserted in the condition of sale of Rajah's land.  

The Ookra Parganah was at last sold to Kashinath Banerjee and others in December, 1813 in satisfaction of a decree of the Court. The new Zamindars continued to honour Barretto's rights but after the expiry of the lease cancelled the pattahs. Payment of sair compensation by the Government was also stopped in 1823. Barretto died on the 25th September 1824.

The industrial base of Sukhsagur had been destroyed by the 1820's. The discriminating tariff policy of the East India Company had ruined Indian cotton manufacture by 1823, and the weavers of Sukhsagur as elsewhere in India must have been facing unemployment. The distilleries were closed somewhat earlier, it is not known why. Sukhsagur, ceasing to be an industrial centre, its population must have been decreasing and the merchants who once frequented the place surely disappeared. In 1823 the firm of Barretto and Sons came to a sudden crash. With the death of its patron-saint and debacle of the fortunes of the Barretto family, the decline of Sukhsagur was inevitable. But the ravages of nature had already cut short this inevitable process. Bishop Heber refers to "recent floods" at Sukhsagur and the District records corroborate it. The result was that the 'Chota Calcutta' had became a desolate place even before Barretto's death.
However, the famous Sukhsagur House, built by Hastings and later on owned by Croftes and Barretto survived the flood, though now utterly deserted. A visitor to the place in 1829 described the gloomy atmosphere of the House in sombre verses, first published in the "Calcutta Christian Observer" and then republished in "The Eurasian and Anglo-Indian Recorder" of January 10, 1905. A few lines from these verses deserve quotation:

"Sukh Sagur (Or the Sea of Delight)
"Ode to the Mansion of the Late John Barretto Esqr.
"And see ! where the desolate mansion of bliss
"where the dark tangled grass hides the serpents that hiss
"And the jackals alone are now glad.
"Fast closed are the doors that were wont to unfold
"For the idle, the busy, the gay,
"Not a voice to be heard, not a face to behold,
"Not an object to tempt or delay.
"Like a thief in the night through the windows I pass
"To the hell where the feast was arrayed
"Where circled full freely the laugh and the glass,
"And the revel till morning delayed".
"How frightful a silence still reigns through the place
"As in mockery misnamed of 'Delight'
"Of the glee of the living no vestige I trace
"Tis the tomb of the dead meets my sight".

But Sukhsagur appears to have again burst into life for a while in the forties when a "pathsala", an English school and a munsif court were established there. It was finally
destroyed by another flood mentioned in Colesworthy Grant's "Rural Life in Bengal". Thornton's description of Sukhsagur "as a town in the British district of Nadia" in his "Gazette of the Territories under the Government of the East India Company", published in 1864, was not based upon latest information. In the Revenue Map of Gunge Sukhsagur, surveyed in December 1851, the place was recorded to have a population of 175 persons only, all Hindus, of which 97 were cultivators. When Grant visited Sukhsagur, it was a small village inhabited principally by the fishermen. Grant, after mentioning that Barretto's successor Mr. Lauraletta, celebrated for his hospitality and sporting propensities, converted the Roman Catholic Chapel into a residence for mahouts (elephant drivers) and fighting cocks, describes how the ravages of a changing river had destroyed all traces both of greatness and degradation, "for not only have this the original House, and the beautiful village and grounds adjacent, which then stood about two or three hundred yards from the bank of the river entirely disappeared, but the river is now fully a mile and a half on the south-east side of where the House formerly stood".

After Sukhsagur had disappeared physically, it slowly disappeared from the public memory. The disappearance is so complete that in the Gazetteers of the district and in similar other publications, the name of Sukhsagur can hardly be traced.
NOTES


2. In the first edition of Hamilton's Gazetteer published in 1815, there is no mention of Sukhsagar.


5. "Nadia Kahini" by Sri Kumud Nath Mallic - page 382

6. Letter from Joseph Barretto to A.Hesilrige, Acting Magistrate of Nadia, dated 15th October 1798
   See Appendix - A copy of this letter can be found in the Misc. Revenue Bundle - State Archives, W.Bengal. In the short history of the Barretto family given in Bengal: Past & Present, Vol.II - July, 1908, pages 366-367 the names of Joseph Barretto's parents have not been given.

7. This House was mistaken "as the magnificent House of the Revenue Board that cost a lakh and a half originally".
   It was wrongly held that the Revenue Board was transferred from Murshidabad to Sukh Sagur in 1772, as Sukh Sagur "was thought more suitable than Calcutta from being in the country" - Cal.Rev. Vol.VI. The mistakes are perhaps due to the fact that Charles Croftes, Accountant General of the Company, had also a bungalow at Sukh Sagur, and perhaps occasionally meetings of the Revenue Board were held at Sukh Sagur in Hastings' Garden House.


9. Ibid, page 13; Hastings succeeded in producing hybrid grain which he called barely-wheat, which combined the nutritive qualities of wheat with the hardiness of barley", Ibid.

10. Ibid, Letter No.XII, dated 28th February 1784

11. Ibid, Letter No.XI, dated 23rd February 1784

12. Ibid, Letter No.XXVII

13. Mohan Prasad accusing Nanda Kumar, State trials - HOWELL, VOL.20

15. Revenue Department, Original consultations dated 17th June, 1777.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.


19. Revenue Department - O.C. dated 17th June, 1777. "The rent for the lands was the same (i.e., eight anna per bigha) as the ryots in other parts of the country paid for land brought by them into cultivation".

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Revenue Department Proceedings, 16th Feb. 1785.

23. Ibid.


27. Journey from Bengal to England - By George Forster - Vol. I - p.2

28. Revenue Department, Proceedings dated 16th February, 1785.

29. Board of Revenue, Proceedings - dated 12th January 1791.

30. Croftes was one of the Trustees of Mrs. Hastings in India - "The Letters of Warren Hastings" - Ed. by Sydney Grier - p.100; Enfeebled by paralysis and assailed by his creditors as he was, Croftes was given the chiefship of Chittagunge where Sir William and Lady Jones stayed with him, and where he died in 1786 at the age of 42 - Bengal Past & Present, Vol. VI page 156.


32. Letter from Joseph Barretto to A. Hesilrige, Acting Magistrate of Nadia, dt. 15th October, 1798. In view of this categorical statement, other descriptions of the Barrettos as Portuguese merchants (in Bengal Past & Present Vol. II and Grants "Rural Life in Bengal") cannot be accepted. In the lists of Europeans residing in the district sent from time to time to the Board of Revenue by the Collector of Nadia, the names of the Barrettos were nowhere included.
33. J. Barretto's letter to the Acting Magistrate of Nadia, dated 15th October 1798 - See Appendix.


36. Ibid.

37. "The average quantity (annually) exported to Calcutta and which is retailed in the Bazar for the town consumption is about ten thousand gallons", Letter from Barretto to Spottiswoode, the Collector of Nadia, dated 23rd September 1793.

38. Proceedings of the Board of Rev. dated 12th January 1791.

39. Board of Rev. Proceedings, 10th July 1810

40. Board of Revenue, Misc. Proceedings dated 19th December 1806

41. Letter from the G.G. in C. to the Collector of Nadia, dated 29th July, 1810.

42. Letter from the Secretary, Board of Rev. to the Collector of Nadia, dated 29th December 1813.

43. Letter from J. Barretto to A. Ogilvie, Collector of Nadia, dated 7th September 1823.

44. Ibid.


47. The fund of the Hindu College was invested with the firm of Barretto and Sons, so that in 1823 the College lost its fund and the Managers of the College had to apply to the Government for financial assistance. Pp.1-2, Presidency College Centenary Volume. Other Calcutta Agency Houses especially those investing in Indigo concerns were also liquidated by 1826 - See, Growth of Commercial Agriculture in Bengal, Vol. I - By Benoy Chowdhury, Pp. 91-92


49. District Gazetteer - Nadia - By J. H. E. Garrett (1910), page 74. "The next (after 1801) serious inundation took place in 1823, but no definite information is now forthcoming as to its extent."


52. "Rural Life in Bengal", page-30

53. Revenue Maps of the District of Nadia preserved in the Collectorate of Nadia.


55. Ibid.