

## The Rise and Decline of Hugli

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**H**.E.A. Cotton records in "Calcutta Old and New" (1909), "When the Portuguese first began to frequent Bengal about the year 1530, the two great centres of trade were Chittagong in the East, and Satgaon in the West. The former was distinguished as the Great Haven or Porto Grande, and under favourable circumstances might have retained her commercial importance...but in an evil hour for her fortunes she became the rendezvous of 'Feringhi' outlaws and pirates, adventurers and fugitives from Goa and its dependencies. Satgaon, which has now dwindled into an insignificant group of huts in the vicinity of the (later) town of Hooghly, was known as the Little Haven or "Porto Piqueno." The Portuguese had established a settlement at Satgaon in 1537. Permission had been given to them by Mahmud Shah, the Pathan Nawab of Gaur, as a reward for their ostensibly agreeing to assist him when Sher Shah first had threatened Gaur. (In the event, Sher Shah captured later in 1538.)

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, on account of the silting up of the River Saraswati and the changing of its course opposite Satgaon, the merchants of Satgaon were forced to seek another market for trade. The great majority settled down at Hugli, four kilometers from Satgaon, on the banks of the new River Hooghly, where the Portuguese had formed a port settlement at the invitation of the Emperor Akbar, in 1579, named Ugolim. Ugolim was now colloquially referred to as Porto Piqueno, instead of Satgaon. Some of the contemporary written mentions of the name of the new town of Hugli by travellers are 'Hugeli' (Fitch, 1588), 'Hugli' (Ain-i-Akbari, 1596-7), 'Gollye' (Hughes and Parker, 1620), 'Ugolim' (Manrique, 1628), 'Oegli' or 'Hooghly' (Van den Broucke, 1660), and 'Ogouli' (Bernier, 1665). The river afforded convenient riverine transportation for goods from Hugli to Rajmahal and Agra. Some of the goods imported by the Portuguese at Hugli for the Mughals are given by S. Manrique in his 'Itinerario' (1628-41), of which Chapter IV is reproduced in 'Bengal Past and Present' (1915), "...a great amount of finished goods made of China silk, such as brocades... velvets, damasks, satins, taffetas...also from China great quantities of porcelain and all kinds of gilt furniture...also pearls and jewels of great value...From Timor sandalwood...cloves and nutmeg of Moluccas...from Borneo camphor..." Besides this lucrative trade, the Portuguese carried on the slave trade, current in those days.

Cotton continues as to Hughli, "Here Fitch found them (Portuguese)

permanently settled when he visited Bengal in 1588. But their neglect to keep the Gulf of Bengal clear of pirates brought the vengeance of Shah Jahan upon them, and in 1632 the town of Hooghly was captured and its entire population transferred as slaves to Agra." Fitch also recorded that Satgaon was on the decline. What led to the Mughal attack on Hugli in 1632, apart from the reason given by Cotton? Were there any undertones? For this we must go back to 1622. This year marked the zenith of Hugli, it then being the most prosperous port in India due to Mughal patronage, for thereafter Bengal became the scene of internecine battles among the Mughals. Prince Khurram, later to be Emperor Shah Jahan, the third son of Emperor Jehangir, became unhappy at his father's marriage to the new principal queen Nur Jahan, after her first husband, Sher Afghan, had been killed on Jehangir's orders, and the increasing influence of her father as wazir of the Mughal Empire, and her brothers as Court grandees, all three developments being at the initiative of Nur Jahan herself. Khurram attacked Agra in due course, but was defeated. Pursued by Prince Parvez and Mahabat Khan, Prince Khurram fled to Bengal. Allegedly, he sought the help of the Portuguese of Hugli among others. The Portuguese apparently declined. Khurram from Burdwan proceeded to and invested Rajmahal. Ibrahim Khan, the Subahdar of Bengal and brother of the Empress Nur Jahan, refused to be bought over and was killed on 20 April 1624 on the very tomb of his dead son at Rajmahal. Khurram entered Dacca in May 1624, being welcomed by Ibrahim Khan's nephew Ahmed Beg, and then marched on Agra, but was again defeated on route by Prince Parvez and Mahabat Khan in October 1624, who were apparently assisted by the Portuguese manning some of the Imperial artillery. A Portuguese officer in Khurram's force, however, deserted him at a critical moment in this battle, taking a large amount of booty and some Mughal ladies. Prince Khurram escaped towards the Deccan. Atul Chandra Roy in "History of Bengal (Mughal Period)" (1968) records of Hugli at this time, "The Portuguese population increased very rapidly...Besides, the number of converts also began to increase on a wide scale." Bernier in "Travels in the Mogul Empire 1656-1668" narrates of the Portuguese pirates in South Bengal, "Their ordinary trade was robbery and piracy...they surprised and attacked whole towns, assemblies, markets...marriage feasts and weddings, enslaving women with fearsome cruelty and burning all they could not carry away." As to the merchants of Hugli, J.J.A. Campus in "History of the Portuguese in Bengal" (1919) avers, "Growing immensely rich...they lost themselves in a whirl of orgies." According to Manucci, the Portuguese of Hugli had also seized in 1624 two female attendants of Mumtaz Mahal, Prince Khurram's favourite wife, and refused to give them back when requested by her to do so. H.G. Keene, a former Fellow of Calcutta University, in "History of Hindustan" (1885) says that two daughters of the Empress Nur Jahan, by her first marriage, had been entrusted to the Jesuits at Hugli.

In 1627 Prince Khurram became the Emperor Shah Jahan, but the Portuguese of Hugli omitted to convey any felicitations at his coronation in 1628 through an envoy. The Portuguese traders of Hugli also continued to supply ammunition to the Mugs, the enemies of the Mughals, as also slaves for the Mug galleys. In Atul Chandra Roy's assessment, "The growing Portuguese population and armaments in Hugli and their known naval superiority threatened the creation of an 'Imperium in imperio' along the coast of the river Hooghli." Manucci in his "Memoirs of the Moghul Court" (1967) was of the opinion that the decision to attack Hugli was at the importuning of Mumtaz Mahal (who, in the event, was to die prematurely before the actual attack), though Danvers avers that the attack on Hugli on the orders of Shah Jehan was to counter, in the public mind, his earlier defeat in the Deccan. The attacking Mughal Subahdar of Bengal, Kasim Khan, who died in 1632 itself, was principally advised by a Portuguese, formerly resident in Hugli, who had some personal scores to settle with the Portuguese residents of Hugli on account of some land disputes decided against him. Manrique says Hugli had 180 Portuguese and 600 local troops, with no land artillery. The Portuguese prayed for deliverance from the Mughals, but according to Manucci, "It seemed as if God desired to chastise the Portuguese..." The Mughals prayed for the delivery to them of the Portuguese. H.C. Fanshawe in "Shah Jahan's Delhi: Past and Present" (1902) reproduces the Mughal prayer of Shah Jahan's time, "...Do thou grant honour to ...the perpetual power and majesty of thy Slave the Sultan, the son of the Sultan, the Emperor, the son of the Emperor, the Ruler of the two Continents, and the Master of the two Seas, the Ghazi, the Mujahid, the Emperor Abul Muzaffar Shahabuddin Muhammad Shah Jahan Ghazi...perpetuate his dominions and empire...defend him and his armies: Be thou his Guardian, his Helper and his Defender. Give his sword the power to slay the rebellious and the wicked...destroy the infidels and the innovators and the idolaters..." The Mughals' superiority in numbers prevailed. After a siege of over two months, 4,400 Christian residents of Hugli were moved on foot to Agra and most sold as slaves, only approximately 4000 reaching Agra after an eleven month journey. Some of the slaves who were traceable and had not died in captivity were allowed to return, by boat to Hugli, gradually from 1633 to as late as 1640. A few of those who died were buried at Padretola in Agra. Tradewise, the Portuguese were not able to attain the status quo ante at Hugli, as other European nations arrived on the Hooghly in quick succession thereafter. The English still at Balasore in Orissa in 1633 were however concerned at the return of the Portuguese to Hugli as a letter dated 17th July 1633 from the English Sub-Factor at Harishpur (Orissa) to the English Factor at Balasore reflects, "The Portuguese, who were captured and expelled from Hughli and carried away as prisoners to Agra, had strangely found favour with the Moghul Emperor Shah Jahan. At least twenty of them have returned to Hughli...such a turn of fortune in their

favour will naturally have a frustrating effect on our interests in Hughli."

After the return of the Portuguese to Hugli, first followed the Dutch 'factory'. John Marshall (1662-1672) describes the Dutch factory at Hughli as 'stately'. In 1652, the English also, thanks to Gabriel Boughton, the surgeon of the 'Hopewell' and his cure of Shah Jahan's daughter Jahanara, had been permitted to set up a 'factory' at Hugli, and by 1658 the headquarters of the English settlements in the Bengal Subah was at Hugli. As Cotton opines, "He would have been a bold man, who would have prophesied the English Empire in India out of these small beginnings." Nevertheless, the English at Hugli also prayed for commercial success. One reads in Percival Spear's "The Nabob" (1963), "For the Company's servants, the day opened with morning prayer at 6 a.m....Apart from the Company's servants, and the free merchants, the only representatives of the professions were the Company's Chaplains and Surgeons. The Chaplains were the more important of the two. They enjoyed a salary and a precedence, in true Puritan style, next to the Governor himself, while the Surgeon had to wait long before he could obtain regular fees from his patients or even commissioned rank. The Chaplain's duty was to read public prayers thrice on Sundays, to take morning and evening prayers at 6 a.m. and 8 p.m." In Hugli it was later changed to 10 a.m. and 8 p.m. as the former hour interfered with business. Though by 1686, Charnock, the future founder of Calcutta, was remarking 'a fort was worth more than an ambassador', nevertheless what was the morning and evening prayer at Hugli of the English East India Company? Percival Spear does not include it; "Sword of the Raj" by Roger Beaumont (1977) does, "....we thy unworthy Creatures do most humbly implore thy goodness for a plentiful Effusion of thy Grace upon our Employers, thy servants, the Right Honourable EAST INDIA Company of ENGLAND. Prosper them in all their public Undertakings, and make them famous and successful in all their Governments, Colonies, and Commerce both by Sea and Land; so that they may prove a public Blessing by the increase of Honour, Wealth and Power to our Native Country, as well as to themselves. Continue their Favours towards us, and inspire their Generals, Presidents, Agents and Councils in these remote parts of the World, and all others that are entrusted with any Authority under them, with Piety towards Thee.....and with Wisdom, Fidelity and Circumspection in their several Stations; that we may all discharge our respective Duties faithfully, and live Virtuously, in due Obedience to our superiors, and in Love, Peace and Charity one towards another: That these INDIAN Nations among whom we dwell, seeing our sober and righteous Conversation, may be induced to have a just esteem..."

Seemingly, a judicious balance between Trade and God, which eventually led from Hugli via Calcutta and Plassey to the British Indian Empire. The year 1686, in Cotton's words, had been "a stormy crisis in the fortunes of the

(English) Bengal factories. The hostility of the Nabob's Foujdar at Hooghly led to a sharp skirmish and after a gallant defence, Job Charnock, who was now the Company's Chief Agent, was compelled to withdraw 'all ye Right Honourable Company's concerns and our own'. On the way down the river, he halted at Suttanuttee (upon which even then he had cast his eye) and negotiated in vain for peace. But the Nabob's troops came nearer and nearer..." Next in the Hugli tapestry are the Marathas. They raided Bengal in 1742, 1743, 1744 and 1749. In the 1742 incursion, they captured Hugli also. In 1756 Siraj-ud-Daula was to march on Hugli and levy a toll on the Portuguese. Hugli was recaptured by the English in 1757, and was permanently ceded to them by Mir Kasim in 1760.

Depending on a person's point of view, when one contrasts the confused nature of the early English organization in Bengal and the subsequent growth of their power, Beaumont concludes either the favouritism of God, or a high incidence of luck for the English. And sequentially it was decided in 1911 to move the capital of India from the British Calcutta to the Mughal Delhi, in which city the British Indian Empire ended, as its predecessors also had, in the words of Peter Mudford in "Birds of a Different Plumage" (1974), "As that wilderness of tombs outside Delhi powerfully reminds the travellers of today, it is in the nature of India to assimilate its conquerors, and also destroy them. There is no place in that land for the vanity of belief in the permanence of human greatness." And the same can be said for Hugli.

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