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# IIC

A Tale of Two Cities  
Under Colonial Rule:  
Chandernagore and Calcutta

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# A Tale of Two Cities Under Colonial Rule: Chandernagore and Calcutta

## **Introduction**

Like London and Paris in Dickens' novel, in this narrative too, two cities keep interacting with each other: Calcutta and Chandernagore. As in Dickens' tale again, one city is associated with English and the other with French culture. But the two Indian cities were colonies of the two Western powers. There were differences and similarities in their growth. But both retained their indigenous common social bonds, and produced a culture based on these Bengali roots.

Before that, let me go back to the origins of the two cities. Of the two, Chandernagore can claim to be the elder sibling. The French East India Company obtained legal ownership of the area in 1688, while it took another ten years for the English East India Company to get a similar license to own the territory that was to be turned into the city of Calcutta. By a curious coincidence, each city was constructed out of three villages. The French colonists built up Chandernagore from three rural settlements—Borkishonpur, Khalisani and Gondalpara. Calcutta was constructed by the British rulers from three villages—Gobindapur, Sutanuti and Kolikata. But unlike Calcutta which remained under uninterrupted English rule, Chandernagore changed hands throughout the 18th century, with several periods of English occupation: 1757–63; 1778–1783; 1793–1802. It was only from 1816 onwards that it enjoyed continuous French rule till November 1947, when the French declared Chandernagore a free

city and handed over charge to local residents. Following a referendum in June 1949 in which 99 per cent favoured merger with India, Chandernagore became a part of India on 5 February 1950.

For the citizens of Calcutta during the 18th and 19th centuries, Chandernagore, or Farashdanga as it was known to the Bengalis in those days, was associated with a swanky lifestyle in a permissive environment. A popular rhyme in those days ran like this:

*Jodi merja hotey chao, tabey Farashdangaye jao.*

*Kasta-pere dhuti chherey, kala-perey nao.*

*Lak juboti chharbey poti*

*Jodi nangta-pere pao.*<sup>1</sup>

*(If you want to be a grandee, go to Farashdanga. Give up your scarlet-bordered dhoti and take the black-bordered one. But if you choose a dhoti stripped of all such frills, lakhs of women will desert their husbands to fall for you...).*

There is in this couplet a subtle allusion to the sartorial style of those days which needs explanation for readers today. The *dhoti*, woven for men, used to be embroidered at its edging with elaborate floral designs in red (*kasta*) or black (*kala*). This thin strip sewn on to the border of the *dhoti* was rather sharp in its embroidery, the designs overlapping the edges. This hurt the tender skin of the Bengali aristocrats! So, they tore out those strips (called *pars* or borders) from the *dhotis*, thus giving birth to the new term *nangta-perey*, or stripped of the *par*.

## **Economy, Administration and Culture in 19th Century Chandernagore and Calcutta**

While a lot has been written about the lifestyle of the English nabobs and the culture of the Bengali aristocrats, *babus* and plebs of Calcutta of this period, very few explorative studies about the socio-economic life of Chandernagore residents and their culture have come to my notice till now. Without any pretensions to specialization in the social history of Chandernagore, I would like to draw the attention of academics to certain interesting features of Chandernagore culture which struck me in the course of my research into 19th century Bengali social history. I also raise a few

questions that may provoke present historians of Chandernagore to delve into the socio-economic structure of this French enclave, that stood apart in certain respects from that of its English twin in Calcutta.

Among the few Bengali historians of Chandernagore's past, we can mention Harihar Seth of the early 20th century, and Bishwanath Bandyopadhyay of the present time. From their findings, it appears that those who formed the upper crust of the city's Bengali population rose to prominence in the 18th and 19th centuries mainly through trade and commerce. One of its earliest aristocrats was Dewan Indranarayan Chowdhury, who was known to have started his career as a trader by sending a shipload of rice and other commodities to Pondicherry in 1729. He was appointed a courtier of the French East India Company in 1730, and five years later received a gold medal from the King of France. He was a great patron of local Bengali folk culture as well as religious activities.<sup>2</sup>

This raises a few questions. How far were Chandernagore's Bengali elite—being more oriented towards trade and commerce—different from Calcutta's Bengali elite who were mainly absentee landlords and compradors? The first generation of Chandernagore's Bengali rich—the Choudhuries, Duttas, Seths, Kundus—were more inclined towards acquiring wealth through trade and commerce than from landed estates, unlike their counterparts in Calcutta who preferred investments in real estate, earning rents from rural zamindaries and huge plots in the city where they set up bazaars and slums. (There were of course some commercial magnates in Calcutta who traded with America like Ramdulal Sarkar, but such people were few and far between.) How far did this entrepreneurial character of the Chandernagore Bengali gentry shape the culture that they patronized, in a way that was different from that of contemporary Calcutta?

Bishwanath Bandyopadhyay makes another interesting observation about the difference between Chandernagore and Calcutta. According to his findings, the hold of Brahmin orthodoxy was far less among the Bengali population of Chandernagore compared to contemporary Calcutta. The majority of the Bengalis of Chandernagore came from the labouring agricultural and artisan castes like

As early as 1789, the French governor of Chandernagore abolished slave trade in his territory, while in Calcutta slaves continued to be openly bought and sold even till the 1830s. It was as late as 1843 that the Anti-Slavery Act was enacted to stop the practice.

Kaibarta (fishermen and peasants), Tanti (weavers), Dhopa (washermen), Goala (milkmen) and Chutor (carpenter). These communities were inclined towards Vaishnavism, which allowed a more permissive and liberal social lifestyle than the Brahmanical order that ruled Calcutta Bengali society. For one thing, the Vaishnavite lifestyle permitted more freedom to women as compared to Calcutta—which could explain the prominence of women performers in Chandernagore’s popular culture. <sup>3</sup>

To these very valid observations made by Bishwanath Bandyopadhyay, I would add a few speculations about the possible effects of the nature of French administration on Chandernagore. Some historical facts should be recalled in this connection. As early as 1789, the French governor of Chandernagore abolished slave trade in his territory, while in Calcutta slaves continued to be openly bought and sold even till the 1830s. It was as late as 1843 that the Anti-Slavery Act was enacted to stop the practice. The last instance of ‘*sati-daha*’ (self-immolation of widows on their husbands’ burning pyre) in Chandernagore was reported in 1808, while in Calcutta or English-governed Bengal it continued till 1829 when it was officially banned. (I should add here that a case was reported in 1940 in Chandernagore when Durgarani Devi, the widow of Anandamoy Gangopadhyay, slit her throat after her husband died from tuberculosis, and was burnt on the same funeral pyre. But this could be an isolated case and could not be strictly categorized as ‘*sati*.’) It would be interesting in this connection to note the working of the penal system in Chandernagore under the French. As in English-ruled Calcutta, capital punishment was on the statute book. But its implementation seemed to be infrequent. The first time we hear of it is as late as January 1883, when two individuals—Sheikh Abdul Panjari and Hiru Bagdi—were sentenced to death. A few years later, in 1894, one Sarat Chandra Bhattacharya was accused of homicide and sentenced to be guillotined. Unlike Calcutta, where hanging was the mode of implementing the death sentence, the French authorities in Chandernagore dispatched those sentenced to death to the Island of Re-Union (in the Indian Ocean) to be decapitated by the guillotine.

In this connection, a late 19th century Bengali writer Durgacharan Ray in his ‘*Debganer Mortey Agaman*’ (1889) describes an odd form of punishment in

Chandernagore called 'half-*phanshi*' in Bengali, or 'semi-hanging'. The convicted person, under this sentence, was made to stand within a small wooden cubicle with a noose hanging over his head. He was required to face the sun, and move his head along with the direction of the sun throughout the day. Once the sun set, he was set free. But by then, he must have been 'half-blind'!

I shall come later to the issue of how the operations of the French penal system in Chandernagore often worked in favour of the citizens of Calcutta who sought escape from persecution by the British police there.

### **Bengali Society in Chandernagore and Calcutta**

To come back to the composition of Bengali society in the two cities in the 19th century. Two characteristics mark Chandernagore's difference from Calcutta. First, we do not find in Chandernagore a robust Bengali middle class of professionals like lawyers, teachers and medical practitioners which had already emerged in Calcutta as an influential class of opinion makers asserting themselves in newspapers, cultural activities, political organizations and other sectors. They were quick to adapt themselves to the contemporary Western discourse of political participation and cultural accommodation. In contrast, Chandernagore Bengali society continued to be ruled by the upper class of commercial and trading communities whose culture remained rooted to tradition. The failure of the rise of an urban modern middle class at that time could be traced to the second characteristic of Chandernagore's development. Unlike Calcutta, where the British colonial administration intervened in the city's education and culture (by setting up English-medium schools and colleges, introducing English literature in syllabi, encouraging theatrical activities) which helped the creation of a lively Bengali urban middle class exposed to Western culture, in Chandernagore, peculiarly enough, the French administration abstained from such intervention in the local culture. In 19th century Calcutta, we find people like David Hare (an English watch-maker-turned educationist, who came to the city and founded a school), or William Jones

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(the famous Orientalist scholar who spent years in the city and established the Asiatic Society).

In 19th century Chandernagore, we do not find French counterparts of such scholars who integrated themselves with the local culture, or made any efforts to propagate their own arts and literature among the indigenous Bengali population. Why?

To seek answers, we should go back to the changing policies of the French colonial administration with regard to its tiny enclave in Chandernagore, ever since its occupation. In the middle of the 18th century, Chandernagore was an important trade outpost for the French. By 1744, Chandernagore had emerged as a 'greater centre of commerce than Calcutta', as described by Robert Clive who termed it as 'the granary of India'. But the successive occupation of Chandernagore by the rival British East India Company and the consequential disruption in the social, economic and cultural life of its citizens in the 19th century led the French colonial authorities to treat the enclave as a step-daughter of sorts. Compared to their colonies in West Africa which received immense French administrative, commercial and cultural investments at the same period, Chandernagore remained a backwater in French colonial strategy. Was the French reluctance to develop Chandernagore as a socio-cultural metropolis (like Calcutta under British colonial rule) a reflection of the gradual withdrawal of the French from the Indian subcontinent in the face of aggressive British rivalry?

Compared to their colonies in West Africa which received immense French administrative, commercial and cultural investments at the same period, Chandernagore remained a backwater in French colonial strategy.

The first generation of the Bengali rich of Chandernagore who were economically beneficiaries of French rule were thus not affected by French cultural intervention in their social lifestyle—unlike their counterparts in Calcutta who were increasingly influenced by English norms and customs that were being aggressively propagated by the colonial administrators and teachers. But there was one thing in common. Like the 18th century Bengali nouveau-riche of Calcutta who, after making money as compradores of the English East India Company or as rentiers, invested part of their wealth in building temples to establish their fame among their community, in Chandernagore too the first generation of rich Bengali traders turned

to the construction of Hindu temples. Thus, Indranarayan Chaudhury in 1740 built the Nandadulal Temple, well-known for its architectural beauty. The Nabaratna Mandir, the complex of temples on the banks of Goswamighat, also known as Kone-Bour Mandir, was built in 1808 by a young widow, Gaurmoni Dasi, in memory of her husband Baidyanath Sarkar, a scion of a rich family of the city. As she was a child-bride, she was affectionately called *kone-bou* in Bengali by the neighbours. In architectural style, it resembled the famous Nabaratna or nine-towered temple built in Calcutta in 1731 by the powerful 'black zemindar' Gobindram Mitra. In 1817, Premnarayan Basu built the famous Rashmancha platform for Rashmela. In 1828, Kashinath Kundu established a trinity of Shiva temples.

It is only towards the end of the 19th century that we find the Bengali gentry of Chandernagore engaging in socio-cultural activities like building schools, hospitals and bringing out journals, activities that had started in Calcutta from the beginning of that century. The first Bengali weekly of Chandernagore—*Prajabandhu*—edited by Tinkorinath Bandyopadhyay, came out in 1882. In 1885, Durgacharan Rakshit founded the first primary school named Ecole Durga. Durgacharan also established an ayurvedic charitable dispensary in 1893. In 1896, Gyansharan Chakrabarty set up an orphanage. Theatrical activities began with the staging of the first Bengali play *Pronoy Pariksha* under the direction of Jadunath Palit in 1871. Palit, along with Mahendranath Nandi and Harimohan Sen set up the famous Chandernagore Library in 1873.

The Chandernagore Bengali gentry's transition from religion-oriented activities to secular concerns like education, health and culture, followed the same trajectory as in Calcutta, although a few decades later. Was the delay due to the political uncertainties and the absence of a stable administration that interrupted the citizens' sense of security for a long period during the 18th century?

### **Popular Culture in Chandernagore and Calcutta**

Parallel to the religious and social activities of the Bengali upper classes in Chandernagore and Calcutta, there flowed a stream of robust folk culture that was popular among the common Bengali inhabitants of both the cities. There were four particular genres—*kobi-gan*, *kathakata*, *panchali* and *jatra*. *Kobi-gan* was usually a form of poetical contest or verbal duels between two groups of *kobis* or *kobi-*

*walas* (the term by which they were known). *Kathakata* was a recital from religious mythology by a single performer (the *kathak*) who punctuated the narration with illuminating interpretations that entertained the audience. *Panchali* was a type of devotional singing, dealing with mythological tales, interspersed with rhymes for fast recitation, and often referring to contemporary social events. Of the four genres, *jatra* or folk theatrical performance, still survives, albeit in a different form.

In Chandernagore, the earliest representatives of this popular culture were the *kobi-walas*, the brothers Rashu (1734–1807) and Nrisingha (1738–1809) who were born in Gondalpara; Nityananda Das Bairagi (known as Nite Baishnab) (1751); Nilmoni Patni; Gorakshanath; Balaram Kapali; Pasha Dhopa; and the famous Hensman Anthony (known as Antony Firingi). As their surnames suggest, most of these *kobi-walas* came from poorer classes and underprivileged communities like Bairagi (a roaming hermit), Patni (a ferryman), Kapali (a hybrid caste from intermarriages among different occupational castes), Dhopa (washerman). The father of Rashu and Nrisingha (a Kayasth) was a clerk in the military department of the French administration in Chandernagore. They lost their father at an early age and drifted into the bohemian world of the *kobi-walas*. They joined the group led by Raghunath Das, one of the pioneers of *kobi-gan*, who had been variously described in old documents as a blacksmith or a weaver. They later formed their own group, composed songs and sang them during poetical contests, and rose to win the patronage of the *dewan*, Indranarayan Chowdhury.

Chandernagore's *kobi-walas* challenged their counterparts in Calcutta. With his reputation, Nityananda Bairagi or Nite Baishnab attracted rivals from Calcutta like Bhabani Beney (coming from the caste of sellers of spices, who lived in Baranagore on what was then the outskirts of Calcutta). The poetical contests (*kobir-lara*) between Nite Baishnab and Bhabani Beney were a rage in Chandernagore.

But the *kobi-gans* sung at such contests were often a collaborative effort between the composers and the singers. The *kobi-walas* were mainly singers who were popular for their vocal rendering of songs. They depended on the composers (known as *bandhan-dars*) who could come up extempore with repartees, which the *kobi-walas* sang to contest the opponent group. Nilmoni Patni for instance, employed for his troupe Gadadhar Mukhopadhyay, a much sought after *bandhan-dar* of those days

who used to be wooed by *kobi-walas* because of his ready wit. By the early 19th century, the *kobi-gan* genre was becoming a thriving commercial enterprise with *kobi-walas* from humble origins gaining wide popularity among the masses, as well as patronage from the local Bengali gentry of Chandernagore, like Indranarayan Chowdhury.

However, tensions between the singers and the composers soon began to erupt. This brings us to the most colourful product of Chandernagore's popular culture—Antony Firingi. He was the son of a Portuguese gentleman who had settled in Chandernagore towards the end of the 18th century. Antony fell in love with a Brahman woman who left her home to live with him. They later shifted to a nearby village, Gareeti. Under her influence, he adopted the manners of Bengali Hindus, discarded his European clothes for a *dhoti* and *chadar*, learnt Bengali and set up a troupe of *kobi-walas*. Initially, because of his inadequate command over Bengali, he employed the composer Gorakshanath Thakur of Chandernagore as a *bandhon-dar* to help him in singing repartees in the *kobir-larai* contests. At one such contest in Chunchura (Chinsurah), Gorakshanath refused to collaborate with him on the ground that Antony owed him a lot of money that was due to him as his employed *bandhon-dar*.<sup>4</sup>

We should be grateful to Gorakshanath since his refusal compelled Antony to start composing his own songs at such contests. And some of his songs still remain classic examples of the eclectic culture that Chandernagore nurtured. For instance, at one such *kobir-larai*, the famous *kobi-wala* from Calcutta Ram Basu made fun of his Hindu manners, saying that however much he might try to be a Hindu, he could never rescue himself from his Christian origins. Antony Firingi hit back:

*Ami bhajon sadhon janine ney, nijetey firingee Khrishtey ar  
Krishney kichhu probhed naire bhai. Shudhu namer phere manush  
phere Eo kotha shuni nai. Amar khoda je, Hindur Hari shey.*<sup>5</sup>

*(I don't know devotional hymns and austere practices. I'm a Firingee (Christian)  
by origin/But, there's no difference between Christ and Krishna, dear brother./*

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*haven't heard of men running after mere names. The One who is my God, is the same Hari of the Hindus...).*

The next important popular folk medium in Calcutta and Chandernagore was the *jatra*—the traditional theatrical performance depicting episodes from the ancient myths (e.g., Krishna-*jatra*) as well as tales from the Mangal-*kavyas* about popular Bengali deities (Chandi, Manasha). In the 18th century, Guruprasad Ballabh was the leading exponent of *jatra* in Chandernagore, where his '*Chandi-jatra*' earned him fame among the audience.<sup>6</sup> The 19th century saw the emergence of the famous *jatra* troupe led by Madanmohan Chattopadhyay, well-known as Madan Mashtar. Among his most popular *jatras* were Prahlad-charitra, Ram-banobash, Harishchandra, and Vidya-Sundar. He was the first to introduce the chorus in *jatra*. After his death, his daughter-in-law took over the management of his troupe, which came to be known as 'Bou-Mashtarer Dal'. (I remember that in the 1960s there was a lane shooting out from the Grand Trunk Road—now a National Highway—called 'Bou-Mashtarer Gali', named in her memory. I am told that it is still there.) From contemporary reports, it appears that Bou-Mashtarer Dal dominated the cultural scene of Chandernagore for years. In fact, most of the *jatra* troupes that succeeded it were off-shoots from Bou-Mashtarer Dal. The prominent leaders of later *jatra* groups like Mahesh Chandra Chakravarty (who was an instrumentalist in Bou-Mashtarer Dal), Nabinchandra Guin, Durgacharan Neogi were originally groomed in Bou-Mashtarer Dal, but later formed their own separate groups. They used the same '*palas*' or plots, mainly mythological stories, for staging their *jatras*.<sup>7</sup>

Two interesting features mark the development of *jatras* in Chandernagore. First, the domination of a troupe led by a woman (Bou-Mashtarer Dal). We do not find a parallel in contemporary Calcutta where it was a male star, Gopal Urey, who held the stage in the *jatra* scene. Peculiarly enough, the name of Madan Mashtar's daughter-in-law who ran the show is lost in oblivion. She was known only as the Bou (daughter-in-law) of Madan Chattopadhyay's family. I hope researchers in the history of Chandernagore discover her name from anonymity and give her her due as the only female impresario in those days. The second feature that is worth investigating is the successive splitting of Bou-Mashtarer Dal. Individual members, some of them actors, some instrumentalists, some writers, broke away from the original troupe and set up separate groups. What were the reasons? Could there

have been a clash of egos? Individual ambitions? Disputes over sharing profits? One may find in the splitting of Bou-Mashtarer Dal a precursor to the splits in the later Bengali theatre movement, from the days of Girish Ghosh, to the IPTA, to Bohurupi and the group theatre.

But to come back to the popular cultural scene of 19th century Chandernagore and Calcutta: the other two folk media were *kathakata* and *panchali*. The *kathaks* primarily came from Brahmin and other upper-caste communities and were well-versed in Sanskrit religious scriptures. Leading among them were Raghunath Shiromoni, Uddhabchandra Churamoni and Dharanidhar. The *panchali* groups on the other hand were led by singers and composers from all communities, like Ramtaran Bhat (a Brahmin) and Chintamani Mala (from a cultivating and weaving caste) in Chandernagore. In Calcutta, the leading *panchali* singers and poets were Ganganarayan Laskar, Lakshmikanta Biswas, Kedarnath Basu and Mohanchand Basu. But their inspiration was the legendary exponent of *panchali*, Dasharathi Ray (1805–1857) or Dashu Ray as he was endearingly called. Although not a resident of Calcutta (he was born in a village in Burdwan and settled down in rural surroundings), he introduced a new style in the traditional narrative of *panchalis* by interspersing the mythological stories with contemporary events and characters, much to the amusement of the listeners. We also come across reports about troupes of women *panchali* singers who were popular in Calcutta in those days. But by the end of the 19th century, they had been forced to wind up because of objections from the English-educated Bengali *bhadraloks* who denounced them as obscene. <sup>8</sup>

In fact, most of the popular folk cultural forms in Calcutta faced tremendous opposition from these *bhadraloks*, who carried on a sustained campaign against them, usually with the help of the British administration, mainly on grounds of obscenity, and finally succeeded in exiling them from the precincts of the city. These exiled folk forms then sought refuge in the Bengal countryside, where they hoped to rediscover the ties that led to their birth. A modern Bengali critic very perceptively describes their plight: 'Faced by the powerful onslaught of English education, prudery camouflaged by Brahma Samaj fastidiousness, and the mid-Victorian morals of the Bankim (Chattopadhyay) group... the *kobi songs* with their tumult, jugglery of tunes and rustic slinging matches had to wind up from Calcutta. Quitting the gas-lit urban

atmosphere, the *kobi songs*, *tarjas* and *panchalis* descended on the dimly-lit village stage, in evenings ringing with the chirp of crickets...'<sup>9</sup>

Unlike Calcutta, where the English-educated Bengali gentry drove out the practitioners of popular culture, did the Chandernagore Bengali urban society demonstrate a more permissive attitude towards them? This is an issue that needs further exploration. We find in Chandernagore, for instance, the *panchali* performers enjoying a space that was denied to their co-artistes in Calcutta. The most colourful *panchali* singer of Chandernagore in those days was the blind singer Chandi, who was known as Chandi Kana. He came from the Tanti or weaving community. He roamed the streets of Chandernagore, hobbling with the help of his stick and singing aloud *panchali* songs. Although the songs were written by *bandhon-dars*, or composers, Chandi's remarkable voice endeared him to the people of Chandernagore, who plied him with enough alms to help him survive.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Culture of the Underworld**

Apart from the Bengali popular cultural activities that Calcutta and Chandernagore participated in, the two cities also shared a common underbelly—the society of the social deviants and outcasts like prostitutes, abandoned women, and criminals like thieves and tricksters. The popular culture and the social underworld existed cheek by jowl in Chandernagore, as also in Calcutta.

If we look at the territorial locations of the popular poets from the lower classes in 19th century Chandernagore, we find that they were living in, or around, Hatkhola, Gondalpara—the same localities which housed large colonies of prostitutes. Some of the prostitutes living here were mistresses of the rich, some were part-time sex-workers (known by the term *half-gerosto*, or half-housewife and half-prostitute), and some full-time professionals. Similarly, in 19th century Calcutta's northern region (which housed the red light area known as Sonagachhi), we find the same composition of prostitutes, the congregation of popular poets and singers from the lower orders, and the cheap printing presses that brought out chapbooks—cheap Bengali books published by Calcutta's small printing presses of Battala.

To get a glimpse of the confluence of the underworld of the two cities we have to go back to the legendary *panchali* poet-singer Dashu Ray. In one of his *panchalis*, entitled *Nalini-Bhramor*, he brings together the prostitutes of Calcutta and Chandernagore in

an episode which describes them undertaking a river voyage across the Ganges to Benaras. Leading among them are Goda Komli (the obese Komli) and Genda Golbadoni (the round-faced Genda) from Gondalpara of Chandernagore. <sup>11</sup>

The culture of the gutter of Chandernagore intercrossed with that of Calcutta at the subterranean level. Even as the popular poets like *kobi-walas*, *jatra* actors, *panchali* singers of Chandernagore interacted with their counterparts in Calcutta, there was a secret interaction between the underworlds of the two cities. The denizens of Chandernagore's Gondalpara bordellos met their sisters from Calcutta's Sonagachhi in the year 1868. That year, the British colonial administration of India enacted a law called the Contagious Diseases Act to prevent the spread of venereal diseases and register all prostitutes and subject them to the most humiliating form of medical examination. It was known as the dreaded '*Choddo Ain*' (from the name of the legislation called Act XIV) among Calcutta's prostitutes and common citizens. The barbaric methods of medical examination and the harassment by the police forced a large number of prostitutes to escape from Calcutta and seek refuge in Chandernagore. <sup>12</sup>

The French enclave, known as Farashdanga in those days, became a cynosure for prostitutes from all over Calcutta because the French administration did not impose any similar draconian legislation on the practitioners of the profession in its domain. (Was it again because of the French cultural tradition's permissive attitude towards the profession, unlike the English Victorian morally repressive Order?)

The best record of this historically massive emigration of prostitutes from Calcutta to Chandernagore is available from the contemporary chapbooks. They were again the printed manifestation of Bengali popular culture of those days, reflecting the surrounding reality. Let me quote excerpts from a few such books. In 1869, soon after the enactment of the Contagious Diseases Act, a farce entitled *Beshyabibaron Natak* (a play describing prostitutes) was written by Tarinicharan Das. The play begins with a Calcutta prostitute's fear of the judgement she might face from a magistrate:

*Ki jani ki koren bicharpoti tai bhebey mori.*  
*Anubhabe bojha holo premer bajar mochke galo,*  
*Khatbe nako chhal-chaturi.*  
*Soi lo, soi, sabey miley chal jai palaiye,*

*Faeshdangaye bash kori.* <sup>13</sup>

*(I'm worried about what rule the judge will lay down. But I have the hunch that the business of love is screwed up, and none of our tricks can help us. So, friends, let's all of us escape and set up homes in Faeshdanga).*

Faeshdanga was the colloquial expression for Farashdanga, in other words, Chandernagore.

A year later, an anonymous booklet entitled *Bahoba Choudda Ain* (In Praise of Act XIV) was published in Calcutta's Battala. In a sarcastic barb against the paramours of the affected prostitutes, the writer, in the introduction, described how they removed their mistresses to Farashdanga among other safer places. He then added that some of these paramours were so infatuated by the charms of these prostitutes that in order to take care of them, they 'visited them once a week, or every alternate day, or even every day by travelling through the *louha marga* (iron-laid path—the railways). <sup>14</sup>

A more detailed reference to Chandernagore and the prostitutes who emigrated there is available from another chapbook—*Panchali Kamalkoli* by Aghorechandra Ghosh, published in 1872. Describing the rush of prostitutes from Calcutta because of the Contagious Diseases Act, he wrote:

*Keu ba chorey kaler gari Faeshdangae kochhey bari*

*Keu ba giye khali bari khujichhey* <sup>15</sup>

*(Some riding the machine-driven car (the railway train) go to Farashdanga and build a house. Some reaching there, are looking for vacant houses).*

He then described the new clientele that the immigrant prostitutes were attracting in Chandernagore:

*Gauranga smaran korey, shikeye tule jhuli,*

*Ranrer bari unki-jhunki machchey kulikuli.*

*Ekkhonete nobyo babu achhen tatha jara*

*Dibya kore chul phiraye bahar diye tara.*

*Pockete pheley panch paisa churut gunje mukhey*

*Ranrer bari earkiti machchey manosukhey..*

.... ..

*At poishar mojur jara khajur chataye thake*

*Khat palongke khasha bichhanaye shuchche lakhe lakhe.*

*(Vaishnavites leaving aside their bag of sacred beads, in hordes, peer into the whore houses while taking the name of Gauranga (Chaitanya); neo-rich babus who live in this city now, with their new-fangled hair style and cigars in their mouth, with just five paisas in their pocket, are carousing to their content in whore houses;... lakhs of labourers who otherwise earn eight paisas and sleep on coarse mats, are spending a night on luxurious bedsteads...)*

Besides these Hindu customers, these bordellos also drew Muslim boatmen from East Bengal who, while carrying goods or passengers across the Hooghly river, occasionally stopped at Chandernagore for a good time. The author describes the Muslim customers thus:

*Bhai sahebera kamiye dari ranrer bari jay*

*Hendu boley whole night nirbighney kataye.*

*Nayer majhi jara tara shune gujob katha*

*Allah Rachhul smaran korey nangor kochchey tatha.*

*Baley –hala har roj ki beye marbo la,*

*Hareshdangaye hakta aat kabar korey ja' !*

*(The Muslims shaving their beard visit the whore houses, and claiming to be Hindus spend the whole night there without any problem. The boatmen, hearing these gossips, cast their anchor there in the name of Allah and Muhammad, and say—'Why the hell should we slog every day plying boats? Let's spend one night at Farashdanga').*

The Battala chapbooks reveal several illuminating features of Chandernagore's social underbelly: one, the relief provided to the persecuted prostitutes from Calcutta by a permissive French administration which allowed them to ply their trade; two, the way their homes or working places acted as a leveler, bringing together under a common roof clients from all classes and religious communities; and three, the social tolerance of the right of popular poets to banter at the hypocrisy of all religious communities, ranging from Hindu Vaishnavites and babus

to Muslim *rais-admi* and poor boatmen (something that strikes me in today's Indian political situation).

### **The Criminal Connection**

Let me now come to the other corner of the underworld where Chandernagore and Calcutta crossed each other's path at times. Just as Calcutta's prostitutes fled to French-ruled Chandernagore to escape British laws, some of the most notorious members of Calcutta's criminal underworld sought shelter in Chandernagore, knowing well that the British police would be prevented from pursuing them in French territory. We get an interesting glimpse of the French–British police encounter in Chandernagore from the reminiscences of a Bengali detective police officer, Priyanath Mukhopadhyaya, during the late 19th century. While chasing a person who had committed a murder in Calcutta, Priyanath traced his whereabouts to Chandernagore. But in those days, the Calcutta police needed the permission of the French administration to enter Chandernagore, which took a long time. The Calcutta detective, along with a few of his colleagues, decided to enter the French enclave in secret, hoping to pounce upon the murderer and capture him. But the Chandernagore police got to know about it, and set its forces to capture the Calcutta cops. While the rest managed to sneak out from Chandernagore, one unfortunate member of the Calcutta police team fell into the hands of the Chandernagore police. He was lucky enough to escape the guillotine, which was the French mode of punishment for transgression of official rules in those days. Since he was a British subject, the French administrators of Chandernagore were considerate enough to put him shackled in the pillory, which was the contemporary British mode of punishment for such transgressions. The pillory was a wooden frame with holes for the head and hands to hold the convict by his neck and wrists. He was left dangling from it for days and nights. In Bengali, it was known as *turum* or *torong*.

The same Bengali detective, Priyanath Mukhopadhyaya, however, managed to elude the Chandernagore detectives a few years later by a clever move. He was tracking a woman called Sushila who had disappeared with precious jewellery after cheating a shop-keeper in Calcutta. He found out that she had taken shelter in Chandernagore. After his previous experience in the French enclave, he decided to be cautious this time. Instead of a direct confrontation with the French police administration, he

hit upon a plan. Incidentally, although Chandernagore was a French territory, its railway station was under British jurisdiction. The station was set up as a part of the train tracks laid down by the East India Railway Company which was a British registered firm, and hence fell under British administrative control. Priyanath kept a vigil at the station for several days, knowing that his prey would have to come to the station one day for some errand or other. Sure enough, one day he found Sushila stepping down from a train which had just arrived from Agra. The Calcutta jewellery shop-keeper who was with Priyanath identified her. Priyanath arrested Sushila on the spot, before she could step out from the station and enter French territory. He immediately took the next train to Calcutta along with his captive. <sup>16</sup>

### **Conclusion**

A few more observations and queries are in order in the hope that historians of Chandernagore are prompted to probe deeper into its colonial past. First, Calcutta under British rule produced generations of English-educated Bengalis (some of them often called Anglicized) who, to a large extent, shaped the social life and culture of the city. But Chandernagore under French rule did not appear to give birth to a comparable number of Francophile Bengali elite. Compared to the number of English-speaking Bengalis in Calcutta, the French-speaking Bengali population in Chandernagore seems to have been minimal. I have not yet come across any major literary or political text written in French by a Bengali from Chandernagore (compared to similar texts in English that poured out from the pens of Bengali writers in Calcutta). In other French colonies or protectorates (in West Africa for instance), Africans educated in French became total Francophiles. They produced some of the best known French poets like Senghor and the West Indian Aime Cesaire, and introduced the anti-colonial literature of 'Negritude', albeit in the language of the colonizer. Why did the Chandernagore Bengalis remain outside this Francophile stream?

In another respect, Chandernagore appears to stand apart from its contemporary and neighbouring British colony of Calcutta, as well as the other French colony, Pondicherry. Pondicherry saw a long history

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of anti-French agitations by the local Tamil population, which drew Gandhi and Nehru there to support them in the 1920s and 1930s. They later organized themselves into the French India Congress in the 1940s, which agitated for Pondicherry's merger with India. Chandernagore, peculiarly enough, cannot boast of a history of such a sustained anti-colonial movement against French rule. Instead, French-ruled Chandernagore became a shelter for the anti-British revolutionaries from Bengal. Of course, there could be evidence of secret plots against the French administration in Chandernagore, which may remain hidden in the archives and await disclosure.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike Calcutta, where both the Bengali nationalist political leaders and the practitioners of popular culture had to face persecution from the British administration at different times, Chandernagore's Bengali population seemed to have been largely left to themselves by a comparatively non-interfering French administration. In fact, as is well known, from the early 20th century, Chandernagore became a refuge for Bengali militant nationalists who sought escape from the British police in Calcutta. Motilal Roy set up the Prabartak Sangha in Chandernagore in 1920, which became the centre of anti-British revolutionary propaganda and activities, and hosted a generation of armed nationalists from British-ruled Bengal. Rashbehari Bose, whose revolutionary career spanned four decades from the 1900s to the 1940s, had his schooling at Dupleix College in Chandernagore during the end of the 19th century, where, he said, he was inspired by the message of the French Revolution of 1789. Who were his teachers whose names have been forgotten? Was such a permissive attitude towards these Bengali revolutionaries by the French administration prompted by the French regime's ideological commitment to liberty, equality and fraternity? Or, was it motivated by its rivalry with the neighbouring British colony? Researchers can delve into the archives in Paris to examine the directives that were being issued from the colonial headquarters to the administrators in Chandernagore during this period.

Thus, the political tale of the two cities—Chandernagore and Calcutta—like Paris and London in Dickens' novel, drifted in different directions, although its Bengali citizens remained interlocked in deep-rooted social and cultural ties.

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