Fort William, Calcutta: Fortifying an Imperial Space

Sutapa Dutta, *Fellow, IIAS, Shimla*

The city of Calcutta (now named Kolkata) in West Bengal in Eastern India is today a bustling metropolitan city. If there is one particular place from where the city originated then it is Fort William, a historic structure that is synonymous with the British presence in Bengal. Fort William on the banks of the River Hooghly in Calcutta has stood as a testimony of the grand edifice of the Raj in India and for all that the British Empire stood for. Built by the English East India Company for purposes of trade and defence, the Fort became symbolic of the military strength of the British Empire in India. It became a centre point and a bulwark around which, literally and metaphorically, the colonial empire developed. Though the English built similar forts in the other two presidencies of Bombay and Madras, these never attained the significance and importance which Fort William did in Calcutta. Though not a single shot was ever fired from the ramparts of the fort, its very existence was a grand reminder of everything that the English stood for. In the general memory of the people of Calcutta, the Fort is not associated with military aggression, rather it has always been perceived as a seat of benevolent administration.

The paper traces the historical significance of the Fort, the shift in its usage and purpose, its evolution from a warehouse, to a fort and later an educational institution, and most importantly, the role of this imperial space in shaping an identity for the British Raj in India. Such a space clearly revealed the dialectics of power and control and in many ways became a microcosmic reflection of the greater plan of the Empire. My paper focuses on such crafted spaces of power and knowledge, and looks at cultural hegemony as an implicit tacit manoeuvring tool in the 'fortification' of power.

From Factory to Fort

When the English first came to Bengal in the middle of the seventeenth century, the place which was to be later named Calcutta was a small hamlet surrounded by unhealthy marshy land. Early in 1600, Elizabeth-I had granted a charter to a group of merchants, later known in history as the East India Company. The demand for exotic commodities from the East and an increasing competition with other European powers were compelling reasons for the Company to establish permanent trading posts in India. Indian ports became outlets of trade with the rest of Asia. Having come to Bengal with allegedly 'purely commercial purposes',[1] early factors like Job Charnock made Sutanuti, on the banks of the Hooghly his 'mid-day halt' in 1690. The Company merchants were allowed by the then ruling Mughal emperors to set up a factory there. No site was marked for a factory, "everyone taking in what ground best pleased them… the English building near the river's side, and the natives within land."[2] Charnock's choice of the site which was to later become the capital of British India, was perhaps not just by chance. Wilson asserts it was "chosen with careful consideration",[3] because of its strategic military advantage. Having realized that trade would inevitably mean skirmishes with native powers and oppositions from rival merchant groups, William Hedges Governor of the Company's settlement in Bengal, as early as 1677 had urged the Company to build a fort for protecting their factory in Bengal. "We must seize some convenient port and fortify it…Custom must not be paid. We must resolve to quarrel with these people and build a fort…".[4]

The English approach to territorial expansion was no different in technique from the other European colonisers. Scholars who have studied the various ways in which the Europeans fought their wars in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have established that mercantilism was very quickly followed by militarism, and fortification was a characteristic way of overseas expansion.[5] This predictable shift from trade to warfare is evident in the decision taken by the Court in England. In 1683, the response was cautious and restrained, albeit with a whiff of threat, "Our business is trade not war".[6] A year later their belligerence is very evident when they sent an

ultimatum to the Nawab at Dacca warning "if the Fort, Town and Territory thereunto belonging be not forthwith delivered to our Lieutenant Colonel Job Charnock, we would have our forces land, seize and take the said Town, Fort and Territory by force of arms".[7]

The Old Fort: A Historical Perspective

In 1693, Sir John Goldsborough tried to secure the area with a mud wall, but permission to fortify was initially not granted by the Mughal rulers. But after a local uprising, the Nawab tacitly conceded to give permission, more for securing the assistance of the English to protect his own territorial interests. By the end of the seventeenth century, the Company had been granted the rights of three villages and Bengal had been declared a separate Presidency. The construction of the Fort began shortly thereafter. It was decided to name the Fort in honour of the reigning King of England, William III. The first so-called Fort was merely a garrisoning of the area, surrounded by mud walls, "built to look like a warehouse for fear of exciting the jealousy of the Mogul".[8] It is significant that even during their early settlements, the English were careful to camouflage their exact intentions not just from the Mughals but most likely from other European colonizers who were at the same time beginning to conceal their colonial ambitions under the garb of trade and commerce.

Between 1701-1703, John Beard played a significant role in making additions to Fort William. He was determined more to ward off any attack than "to be always giving to every rascal" who thought he could injure the interests of the English.[9] After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, further work was done to strengthen the Fort. By 1710, the Fort as it stood was "an irregular tetragon of brick and mortar",[10] an expansive bastion with mounted guns and heavy canons. Internal changes took place simultaneously as mud huts and thatched roofs were pulled down and more permanent warehouses and lodgings were built in its place. A long row of commodious lodgings were added for the writers (clerks) who came from England. As trade expanded, Company servants, both civil and military, arrived in numbers and accommodation had to be sought outside the walls of the Fort. Within a couple of decades after Charnock had first landed here, Calcutta had become a thriving busy port of commerce.

The gradual expansion and strengthening of the Fort coincided with the increasing confidence and belligerent contentions of the English East India Company in Bengal. While it seemingly protected the trading interests of the merchants and provided security to its residents, the implicit message was also one of symbolic assertion of military prowess not to be taken lightly or ignored. However, all its show of strength was done in a slipshod manner and though the Fort "made a very pompous show to the waterside by high turrets of lofty buildings", it nevertheless "lacked real strength or power of defence".[11] So, when the combative behaviour of the English invited the ire of Siraj-ud-daullah, the Nawab of Bengal, Fort William was not in the least prepared to withstand the attack. The Nawab, strongly objected to fortification on his land and expressed his intention saying:

> It has been my design to level the English fortifications raised within my jurisdiction on account of their great strength. If the English are contented to remain in my country, they must submit to have their fort razed, ditch filled and trade upon the same terms as they did [earlier]…[12]

The Nawab's threat was presumably not taken seriously and when in June 1756 his army attacked Calcutta there was virtually no degree of preparedness among the handful of English men who guarded the Fort. J. H. Holwell, the then Governor of the Fort recounts the Nawab marching with an army of "30,000 horses and 35,000 foot with about 400 elephants of war." This was clearly no match for the "260 European officers and soldiers".[13] The subsequent capitulation of the Fort, the infamous Black Hole Tragedy in which almost all those who were in the Fort lost their lives, and the inglorious surrender of Holwell and a few of his men, revealed the weaknesses of this grand façade that the English had constructed for security.

A swift imposition of the authority of the English was possible by Robert Clive demanding restoration of privileges and threatening the Nawab with consequences of non-compliance. The recapture of Bengal after a farcical Battle of Plassey in 1757, saw a significant reversal of power between the Nawab of Bengal and the English. Fort William and Calcutta was back in the possession of the English without much opposition from the Nawab and thus began a more confident phase for the English. But a vital lesson had been learnt. John Brohier, an engineer with the Company at Fort St. David submitted his lucid proposal to

> erect …a Hexagon as a citadel to the Town…and as most of the Apartments in the remains of the Old Fort are demolished they must be rebuilt in the citadel, with the Military and Civil Store Houses, Magazines and Bombproof Lodgements requisite in times of siege, with proper wharfs and Stairs to the Waterside, and other needful works.[14]

This was probably the first time Fort William was being referred to as the 'Old Fort'.

New Fort William: Changing Perspectives

The need for a new Fort denoted a change, a complete overhaul of the mercantile image of the Company and

a new incarnation as an Imperial power. The Company needed a stronger fortification for fear of threats from indigenous rulers of Bengal as well as from European competitors. The battered old fort required to be replaced with a citadel more solid and impregnable. A more proactive imagining of an English identity back home[15] meant a similar projection of identity in its colonies and the new fort had to be just one of its many manifestations. When work began in 1757, there was shortage of money and manpower. The Directors of the Company showed their resentment to spend the vast amount of money required and in response to Clive's letter to the Select Committee in January 1758, wrote back:

> You are so thoroughly possessed of military ideas as to forget that your employees are merchants and trade their principle object, and were they to adopt your several plans for fortification, half our capital would be buried in stone walls.[16]

But Clive could persuade the Council to fortify Calcutta "while every circumstance is so favourable for it",[17] and a high ground eastward to the old fort, near the river was chosen. The new fort which commenced under the directions of Captain Brohier required a garrison of 3000 men to defend it, and had cost the company "amounting up to December 1761 to near pounds 350,000".[18] Work continued for some years in which many made large fortunes "as did everyone who was concerned with the erection of Fort William"[19] and by 1781, the new fort was completed "at the total cost of two millions sterling".[20] It was:

> an irregular octagon, with five sides towards the land and three towards the river…surrounded by a deep and wide moat, which is usually quite dry, but can be flooded from the river whenever necessary. The moat is crossed by six draw-bridges, leading to the six gates…The water Gate leads to the river, and on the directly opposite side of the Fort, facing the East, is the Chowringhi Gate, the main entrance over which are the quarters of the General Commanding the District. Over the Treasury Gate is the Calcutta residence of the Commanders-in-Chief. The other gates are also surmounted by quarters occupied by the chief of the garrison.[21]

When the Fort was completed it became a major representation of the might of the British power in India. In Firminger's view:

> Of the worth of Fort William in modern warfare, we do not profess to be able to form an opinion. It may however, be safely assumed that no hostile power would nowadays attempt to strike at the British in India by a river attack on Calcutta. From the point of view of an XVIIIth century military architect, however, the present Fort William is, perhaps, one of the finest things of its kind ever built.[22]

The 'worth of Fort William in modern warfare' was never tested; the military compulsions of defence for which the Fort was primarily built had largely died out. By now the Company had become the virtual masters of Bengal after their victory at the Battle of Buxar in 1764 and a formidable power to reckon with. Despite its reduced military usage, the Fort remained largely as a symbol of the founding of the British Empire in India and for long it was customary for British rulers to make their entry into Calcutta through the Fort William.

A Picturesque Showpiece of British Power

The new Fort became the most impressive showpiece of British rule in India. The views expressed by the English residents of Calcutta in the 1780's deemed it as:

> One of the finest forts in the world…[able] to secure the harbour from invasion…[with all] the bustling charms of a garrison.[23]

And Miss Eliza Fay, who left a vivid account of early colonial Bengal writes:

> Our fort is so well kept and everything is in such excellent order, that it is quite a curiosity to see it, all the slopes, banks and ramparts are covered with the richest verdure which completes the enchantment of the scene.[24]

Clearly then, there was a paradigmatic shift in the way the fort occupied peoples' imagination. It had the 'charms' of a secure fort and a bustling garrison, and Miss Fay's sense of personal ownership of the place heightens her pleasure of seeing this 'enchant[ing] scene' of the 'richest verdure', of slopes and banks kept in 'excellent order'. Fort William now was no longer just a particular citadel, it had extended to contain an entire town which included a massive warehouse and treasury, residences for the Commanders of the army, government houses and mess rooms, a chapel and a prison house, barracks and garrisons, parade grounds and gardens, harbours and rowing clubs.

These new structures built by the English, in terms of art and architecture, presented a hybrid cultural statement of Mughal and European power. The royal splendour and flamboyance of the erstwhile Mughal rulers was emulated in the new buildings constructed by the English in Bengal. Ceremonial styles, opulent interiors, and displays of power and wealth were observed and considered necessary to suitably impress the masses.[25] The visual representations showed the anxiousness of the English to bring about a radical change in the image of an Englishman. William Hodges, who was commissioned by Hastings to draw Indian scenes, most frequently illustrated Indian forts, to accentuate that "the historic formidability of the Indian fortifications made British military successes all the more impressive".[26] Hodges's *Select Views*, and later the partnership of

Thomas and William Daniell which resulted in *Oriental Scenery (1795-1808)*, manifested the pride of the English accomplishments. Their visual representations of imposing Palladian buildings on the streets of Calcutta, the harbour with its stately ships, the Council Houses, the Writers' Building, the New Court House, were as much a displaced nostalgia for everything 'English', as it was bewildering in its exotic foreignness.

Education: An Imperial Agency of Change

Education was considered necessary in conjunction with the imperial agency to formulate new ways of bringing a radical change in the image of the English rulers. Having replaced the Mughals who were particularly represented by the English as despotic and degraded, the new rule was posited as a modern benefactor that would bring about improvement in society. As Ashis Nandy points out, the 'psychology of colonialism' was based on "a clear disjunction between India's past and its present".[27] To legitimize British acquisition of India it was necessary to project the English as benefactors and their 'rule' as a benevolent and necessary form of despotism for the good of the people.

When in 1772, Warren Hastings, the first Governor General of India took office he was appalled at the general ignorance and incompetence of the Company's civil servants. Realizing the important role education was to play in the consolidation of a permanent rule, he was quick to acknowledge: "Every accumulation of knowledge, and especially such as is obtained by social communication with people over whom we exercise a dominion founded on the right of conquest, is useful to the state: it is the gain of humanity".[28] Hastings had an imperial vision and in the founding period of the British Raj he can be justly credited for the shrewd adaptation and skilful manipulation of existing socio-cultural institutions of India. His encouragement of oriental learning and patronage of traditional educational institutions was instrumental in the phenomenal revival of ancient learning in India. At his initiative, the Asiatic Society of Bengal was founded in 1784 which made significant contributions to India's literary landscape.

Richard Marquis Wellesley, the next Governor General was much enthusiastic to give shape to Hastings' dream of a centre of learning which would provide training and knowledge of Indian languages. In his Minutes in Council at Fort William, dated 18 August 1800, Wellesley stated his objective in establishing a college in Bengal:

> The British Possession in India now constitute one of the most extensive and populous Empires in the world…The duty and policy of the British Government in India therefore require, that the system of confiding the immediate exercise of every branch and department of the Government to Europeans educated in its own service, and subject to its own direct control, should be diffused as widely as possible, as well with a view to the stability of our own interests, as to the happiness and welfare of our Native Subjects.[29]

With his keen perception, Wellesley realized that the mercantile image of the Company needed to change if it was to establish a more solid foundation in India. Moreover, the function of the officials of the Company had now drastically changed from the earlier role of factors and merchants, and "commercial and mercantile knowledge is not only unnecessary, …[even] the mercantile title which they bear, not only affords no description of their duty, but is entirely at variance with it".[30] This recognition of the need to adapt and change their learning and practices to the needs of the situation was perhaps one of the strongest reasons for a handful of merchants to have built the greatest Empire in the world.

The College of Fort William

It is significant that the foundation of the College at Fort William was on 4 May 1800, the first anniversary of the fall of Seringapatam. It was to be the "most becoming public monument which the East India Company could raise to commemorate the conquest of Mysore".[31] The College, thus, became from its very inception a feather in the cap of the Company's achievements in India. It became synonymous with the many indicators of power and glory of the British. The objectives of the college, its administration, the rules and regulations were drawn with objective precision and strategic planning. It was decided to locate the College at Writers' Building in the heart of the city and to hire additional buildings if required, before a more commodious and ideal place could be located. The College contained accommodation for students and staff, dining hall, lecture rooms, a science laboratory, a large exam hall 68 feet by 30 feet, and a library which had valuable manuscripts in its collection.

The objective of the institution was, as Wellesley was to stress in his Minutes, to acquire an intimate knowledge of the languages, the laws of the country, in order to understand and administer more efficiently and effectively. The Civil Servants of the East India Company who came to India were no longer to be considered as agents of a commercial concern but were now regarded as the ministers and officers of a powerful Sovereign. These young lads whose 'limited education' and 'pernicious habits' Wellesley found to a 'great disadvantage' required "their studies, the discipline of their education, their habits of life, their manners and morals …so ordered and

regulated as to establish just conformity between their personal consideration, and the dignity and impertinences of their public stations."[32]

Even though Wellesley maintained that the college was for the general 'happiness and welfare of our Native Subjects', and harped on 'our duty towards the Native powers of India', nevertheless he was emphatic that "this Empire must be maintained in some of its relations by the same spirit of enterprise and boldness which acquired it."[33] His Minutes remind the extraordinary efforts that went in to contribute to the 'establishment of this Empire', and finally in a long, florid, rhetorical outpouring he states:

> …we must now seek, not the instruments by which kingdoms are overthrown, revolutions governed, or wars conducted, but an inexhaustible supply of useful knowledge, cultivated talents, and well ordered and disciplined morals; these are the necessary instruments of a wise and well regulated government: these are the genuine and unfailing means of cultivating and improving the arts of peace, of diffusing affluence and happiness, willing obedience and grateful attachment over every region and district of the vast Empire…[34]

Wellesley's language gives the impression of 'useful knowledge' being as strategically important in the establishment and securing of the Empire as earlier military order and expertise. It is obvious then that the 'inexhaustible supply' of 'cultivated', 'well ordered', 'disciplined' knowledge was to be implicitly as much required for the 'training' of young civil servants and the 'Native Subjects', as much as force and domination were required to control the Empire.

The Oxford of the East

A Public Department notification to all civil servants in the Bengal Presidency made it mandatory to know the languages and laws of the land. It stated:

> From and after 1 Jan 1801, no servant will be deemed eligible to any of the offices unless he shall have passed an examination (the nature of which will be hereafter determined) in the laws and regulations and in the languages, a knowledge of which is hereby declared to be an indispensable qualification.[35]

All the Civil Servants of the Company who were appointed to the Presidency of Bengal had to be attached to the College for the first three years after their arrival in Calcutta. The curriculum included courses in vernacular languages and literature, history and science, knowledge of Hindu and Mohammedan laws, ethics, and civil jurisprudence, the political economic and commercial institutions of the land. A department for the study of Persian and Arabic was begun in the College along with almost all major vernacular languages.

Only Europeans were appointed professors and teachers. Wellesley took personal interest in those he appointed in the College, and most of them like David Brown (Provost), Claudius Buchanan (Vice-Provost), N.B. Edmonstone (Persian), John Baillie (Arabic), H.T. Colebrooke (Sanskrit), J.B. Gilchrist (Hindustani), William Carey (Bengali), went on to make considerable name for themselves. Indians were appointed as *Munshis* to help assist and translate Indian languages and literature. Some distinguished Indian scholars eminent in their area of study were Mrityunjay Vidyalamkar (Sanskrit), Ramram Basu (Bengali), Mir Bahadur Ali (Hindustani), Maulavi Allah Dad (Persian), and their contributions were equally important to make the College at Fort William the 'Oxford of the East' within a couple of years of its inception. An essay written by a student of the College in 1802 expressed this feeling:

> The establishment of the College of Fort William has already excited a general attention to Oriental languages, literature and knowledge, which promises to be productive of the most salutary effects in the administration of every branch of the affairs of the honourable Company in India.[36]

In spite of its initial success, the College soon became the point of contention among the Court of Directors. Kopf observes, "For the moment the College of Fort William had become a political football in the larger economic struggle between the members of the Court of Directors and the Board of Control".[37] But the issues were not just political or 'mercantile mentalities' as Wellesley insinuated. The larger issues were a clash of personalities amongst the members. While Wellesley's aim was to train the newly appointed recruits of the Company to undergo "an assimilation to Eastern opinions", Charles Grant, the Director of the Board, regarded Westernization as a more efficient way. The Company regarded the College as a potential centre for the gradual evangelization of India, and much before they openly introduced this clause in the Charter of 1813, it is evident from what Charles Grant wrote in a letter to the Rev. David Brown, dated 19 June 1810, "believing the Institution to be capable of producing considerable effects, not political only but religious and moral..."[38] Wellesley tried to convince the Board by emphasizing that:

> the College of Fort William is founded on the principles of Christian religion, and is intended not only to promote the knowledge of Oriental Literature, to instruct the students in the duties of the several stations to which they may be destined in the government of the British empire in India, …but also to maintain and uphold the Christian religion in this quarter of the globe…[39]

But he failed to persuade Grant. In 1806, as the result of a revised plan for training the civil servants, the European

curriculum was removed to Hailebury College in England and a number of drastic reductions were made in the College at Fort William. By the time the College of Fort William had ceased to function in 1854, it had made an immense contribution towards the revival of vernacular languages and literature in India.

Conclusion

Fort William is a microcosm of Calcutta; it is as M.L. Augustine calls his book on Fort William, 'Calcutta's Crowning Glory'.[40] There would have been no Calcutta without the Fort. And it would not be too off the mark to say that the Fort illustrates the history of the British Raj in India and in many ways share a comparable destiny. The Fort manifests the rise of a small mercantile company, its glorious military triumphs, and the colonialist's conjunct pride in their cultural and intellectual achievements. It is symbolic of a journey made from a foothold on the banks of the Hooghly river to the British occupation of a larger more stable place as the administrators and rulers of India. It also represents the changing roles played by the colonizers in fortifying a space for themselves in their various guises as merchants, conquerors, administrators and knowledge imparters. The production of knowledge was as much a statement of 'owning', 'civilizing', and 'controlling' an imperial space as trade and territorial expansion had been earlier. But like the 'picturesque' visual representations of the Empire of the eighteenth century, such references of othering were legitimized by its aestheticizing appealing representations.

Notes

1. Wilson, C.R. 1895. *The Early Annals of the English in Bengal*, Vol. I. London and Calcutta: Thacker & Co., p. 1.
2. Ibid. pp. 209-10.
3. Ibid. 128.
4. From Hedges's Diary, quoted in Wilson, p. 89.
5. Parker, G. 1996 [1988]. *The Military Revolution: Military innovation and the rise of the West 1500-1800*. (2nd edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
6. Parker, p. 133.
7. Wilson, p. 90.
8. Ibid. p. 132.
9. From Hedges's Diary, quoted in Wilson, p. 161.
10. Wilson, p. 131.
11. Court's Letter, 2 Feb 1713, cited in Chakrabarty, B., B. Chattopadhyay and S. Das, 1995. *Fort William: A Historical Perspective*. Calcutta: Sankar Monda, p. 15.
12. Letter from the Nawab to Khoja Wajid, 28 May 1756, cited in Chakrabarty, p. 19.
13. Letter from J. Z. Holwell to the Court of Directors, 17 July 1756, reproduced in Hill, S.C. (ed.). 1985. *Bengal in 1756-57*. In 3 Vols. Delhi, London John Murray: Published for the Government of India., reprint 1985, Vol. 1.
14. Letter from J. Z. Holwell to the Court of Directors, 17 July 1756, reproduced in Hill, Vol. I.
15. 'Rule Britannia' was first sung in 1740. Metcalf, B.D. and T.R. Metcalf. 2006 [2001]. *A Concise History of Modern India.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 50.
16. Quoted in Augustine, M. L. 1999. *Fort William: Calcutta's Crowning Glory*. New Delhi: Ocean Books Pvt. Ltd., p. 127.
17. Ibid.
18. Chakrabarty, p. 39.
19. Firminger, W.K. 1906. *Thacker's Guide to Calcutta*. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., p. 27.
20. Ibid. p. 28.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid. p. 26.
23. Cited in Cotton, H. E. A. 1980. *Calcutta Old and New*. Ed. by N.R. Ray. Calcutta, pp. 689-90.
24. Ibid.
25. See Collingham, E.M. 2011. *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj 1800-1947.* Cambridge: Polity Press.
26. Quoted in Crowley, J. E. 2011. *Imperial Landscapes: Britain's Global Visual Culture 1745-1820*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, p. 180.
27. Nandy, A. 1993. *At the Edge of Psychology*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 17.
28. Hastings to N. Smith, letter dated 4 October 1784, quoted in Kopf, D. 1969. *British Orientalism and the Bengali Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernisation, 1773-1835*. Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, p. 18.
29. Roebuck, T. 1819. *The Annals of Fort William College*. Calcutta, pp. i-ii.
30. Ibid. p. ii.
31. Ibid. p. xxiv.
32. Ibid. p. vi.
33. Ibid. p. xi.
34. Ibid.
35. Selections from Calcutta Gazette, Vol. III, 1868, quoted in Das, S.K. 1978. *Sahibs and Munshis: An Account of the College of Fort William*. Calcutta: Orion Publications, p. 2.
36. *Essays by the Students of the College of Fort William in Bengal.* 1802. Calcutta: Honorable Company's Press, p. x.
37. Das, p. 27.
38. Ibid. p. 28.
39. Ibid. p. 7.
40. Augustine, 1999.