

A Dependent City in Independent India in Hugli District: Its Evolution, Expansion and Related Issues

Subhendu Ghosh^a and Giyasuddin Siddique^b

^aResearch Scholar, Department of Geography, The University of Burdwan, India

^bProfessor, Department of Geography, The University of Burdwan, India

Abstract

The process of urbanization throughout the world is advancing at an unprecedented pace and India is not an exception. A number of urban centers have developed on the west bank of the River Hooghly in a narrow elongated strip in Hugli District. Chandernagore is one of those urban centers which is quite older than Kolkata and has been established by the French traders primarily as a trading port to avail the opportunities offered by the River Hooghly and as an easy route of fleets engaged in export and import of commodities and also continued even after India became independent. The city bears more or less the legacy of its past to be observed in its architectural and cultural exhibits. With its glorious socio-cultural heritage of past, the city has experienced phases of change in its urban morphology and planning. Almost complementary to the changes, the city is now experiencing a number of urban-ecological and environmental problems of variable magnitude, resulted mainly from ever increasing pressure of population which invites all other ecological crises subsequent to wanton demand on space and energy. The present study is an endeavor to explore the growth and expansion of the city and related issues.

KEYWORDS: Cultural heritage, urban development, urban ecology, urban growth, urban morphology

1. Introduction:

In West Bengal, a large number of prominent urban centers have been emerged along the west bank of the River Hooghly in a narrow elongated strip from Bansberia in the north to Uluberia in the south during 17th to 19th century. Chandernagore is one of these older urban centers which still bear its own legacy. The city was first evolved as a temple town in the 15th century (Temple of goddess *Chandi*) (Chakraborty, 1999: 50) and gradually became a colonial town with advancement of time. Chandernagore claims a specific identity in the history of foreign rule in Bengal. While the whole Bengal was ruled by the British East India Company in colonial time, Chandernagore was administered by the French East India Company up to and even for a period after the independence. However, being a part of Bengal, its intellectual relation with Bengal should have been influenced by art, culture, literature and other aspects of the surrounding area. The city experienced a gradual pace of urbanization which sprung from the Muslim period, but actual urban entity was received from the French traders after the establishment of settlement in the city. But Chandernagore had to absorb the British economic and cultural forces similar to the other parts of the province. The Danish influence is still evident in some parts of the city that bears a mixed archeological as well as cultural imprint in its urban landscape. Urbanization is the process of becoming urban and is a demographic process through which an increasing proportion of the population of a region or a country is accommodated in an urban space (Husain, 2012: 351). Urbanization results from the concentration of large and small scale industries accompanied with

commercial, financial and administrative set up in the cities and development in transportation and communication, cultural and recreational activities. It implies a cultural and socio-psychological process wherefrom people receive the material and non-material cultural traits that include the behavioral patterns and various types of organization of the city. Urbanization is associated with the urban plan, structure and morphology giving rise of an urban ecology. But uninterrupted growth with congestion and sprawl ultimately leads to some urban ecological and environmental problems of varying magnitude in the city.

2. Objectives:

The main objectives of the present study are:

- i. To identify the stages of evolution and the distinctive characteristics that have still retained in the Chandernagore city; and
- ii. to look into the current extension of the city and the factor behind it

3. Methodology:

The methodological start to the enquiry subsumes the empiric observations to be examined by theoretical constructs, incorporating the data and information, qualitative and quantitative, available on their historic past and present collected from various sources to be followed by amassing, tabulation, computation, analysis and interpretation of the derivatives to fulfill the objectives.

4. An Outline of the Area:

The study unit Chandernagore is located in the Chandernagore Sub-Division of Hugli District. It is one of the oldest Municipal Corporations of West Bengal. Geographically, the city extends from 88°18'24" East to 88°24'26" East Longitude and from 22°50'54" North to 22°57'17" North Latitude with a total area of 22.03 km² (DDP-CMC, 2012-2017) that have divided into 33 wards (Fig: 1). The city has been divided in two parts in accordance with its temporal expansion of its geographical location and nature of land.

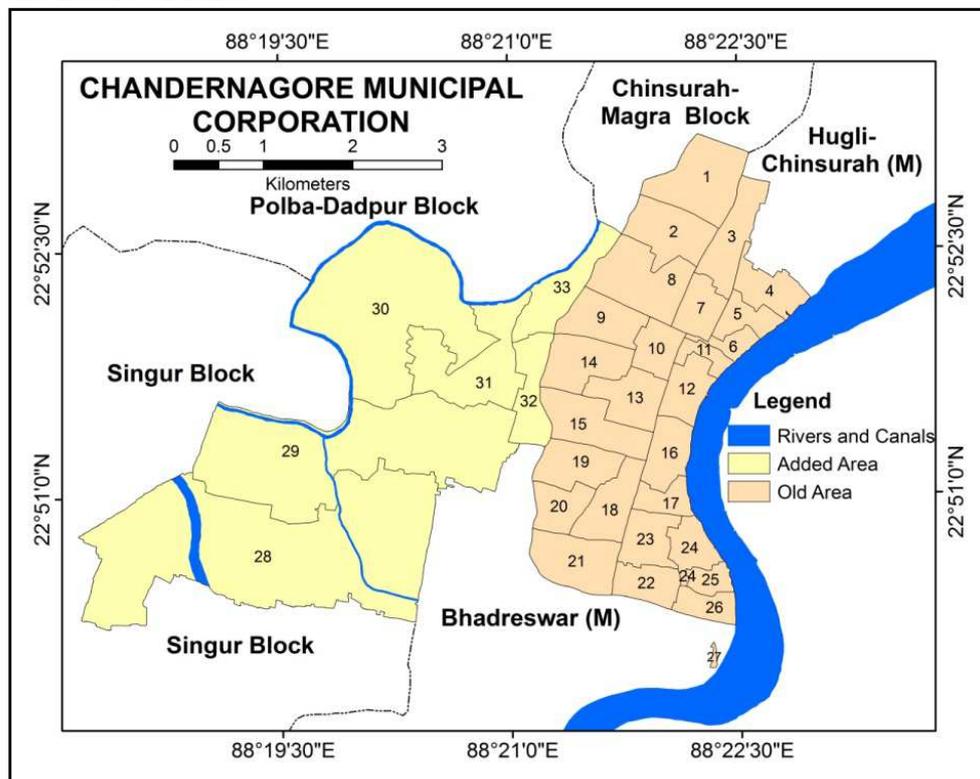


Fig: 1 The Study Area

Source: Prepared by the authors

4.1. Area Developed prior to 1991 (Ward 1 to 27):

This is now the core area of the town. Core activities are carried out in this part of the town since the French rule. This area accommodates all the commercial, educational and official institutes of the city. Being a part of the old area, Ward number 27 is a bit isolated from the town because of its geographical location. Whole of the ward is surrounded by the Wards of the neighboring Bhaderswar Municipality. The Ward is not considered in the present review because of its isolated location in between the Bhadreswar Municipality and the Champdani Municipality.

4.2. Added Area: Post-1991 development: (Ward 28-33):

The added area of Chandernagore city initially was under the jurisdiction of Khalisani Gram Panchayat before its incorporation with the Chandernagore Municipal Corporation (CMC) on 31st December 1994.

Geographically, the city is surrounded by Hugli-Chinsurah Municipality, Chinsurah-Magra Block, Polba-Dadpur Block and Singur Block in the north, Singur CD Block in the west, Singur CD Block and Bhadeswar Municipality in the south and Hugli River in the east. The River Saraswati, an abandoned channel of the Bhagirathi, flows through north and north-west margin of the city, The Bhadeswar Khal flows through the west. The G.T. Road runs through the eastern part and the Eastern Railway runs through the middle of the city and the Delhi Road runs through the western border of the city.

Origin of the Name:

Chandernagore is one of the very old human habitations of Bengal. This is evident from five hundred year's old Bengali folk literature '*Manasamangala*' of Bipradas Piplai (A.D.1495) in which the name of Boro, a quarter of the town lying on the river side was mentioned (Seth, 1924: 779-791). Later, some places of Chandernagore, considered as testimony to the antiquity of this habitation, are also mentioned in a Sanskrit text "*Digbijay Prakasha*" (A.D. 1600) (Mitra, 1948:996) and in '*Chandimongala*' of Kavikankan Mukundaram Chakraborty (last half of A.D. 1600) (Seth, 1924: 779-791). There are differences in the views regarding the origin of the name of the city "Chandernagore". It is evident from some writings that the name 'Chandernagore' came from the term '*Chandra*' (Moon), The Hugli River has meandered down in the lap of Eastern Chandernagore which resembles a part of the moon's orb and because of this crescent like shape, and the name 'Chandernagore' has been originated (Seth, 1924: 779-791).

But some scholars have opined that the name came from the '*Chandan*' (Sandal Wood), it is evident that in the last quarter of seventeenth century Sandal Wood was used to be exported from here, and also some Red Woods (probably Red Sandal) were exported in large quantities. Rudra, the virtuous king of Nadia, gathered Sandal Wood perhaps from this region close to Hugli. Many authors with such belief infer that the name 'Chandernagore' had come from the '*Chandan*' (Sandalwood) forest nearby or from import-export of Sandal wood (Seth, 1924: 779-791).

Two villages, *Chak Nasirabad* and *Boroquinchenpur*, were once located in the northern part of Chandernagore. *Boroquinchenpur* was a large village in which a renowned temple of goddess Chandi was erected by the legendary rich merchant 'Sreemanta Saodagar'. Due to the existence of Chandi temple, where Many trading ships stopped for prayer at the temple with hope of trouble free journey on waters, the point may have been called as '*Chandir nagore*' (the place of Chandi) which later came to be known as '*Chandernagore*' at the time of French (Chakraborty, 1999:

50). In old days, *nagar* meant big temple, and this assumption on the origin of the name seems more acceptable.

Physical Environment:

The CMC occupies a small geographical area of 22.03 km² (Draft Development Plan-CMC, 2012-2017), and is situated on the newer alluvium deposition of greater depth of Gangetic delta being part of the Great Bengal Basin. The deposition of the material has taken place during the early Holocene age. The subsurface deposits are purely unconsolidated material with clay, silt, sand and gravels deposited in Holocene age. The depth of the deposits has been measured with the information gathered from a bore hole at Chandernagore. The deposits are composed of the sub-angular gravel of quartz and feldspar with a depth of about 46 metres (Oldham, 1893:432-34).

The variation in surface elevation is very little as the area is a part of flat flood plain. The general slope is from north to south. The average elevation of the northern part of the CMC ranges from 8.0 m to 9.0 m which is further reduced in the southern part, from 7.0 m to 7.5 m (Draft Development Plan-CMC, 2007-2012). The surface of the city is covered with thick clay layer which has provided opportunity to form a number of ponds of various sizes.

The study area lies under tropical sub-humid monsoon climate regime and is classified as 'Moist Sub-Humid type' of climate after Thornthwaite. The normal annual rainfall of the area is 1453.7 mm. Maximum of rainfall occurs during the monsoon season from June to September. The normal mean monthly temperature is 25.7 °C and maximum and minimum temperatures of the area are observed in the month of May (30.7 °C) and January (17.9 °C) respectively (Ganguly, 2013: 07).

Growth of Chandernagore City:

Chandernagore is more than 300 years' old. The city has passed through slow processes of urbanization started from the time of *Mughal* rule in *Bengal*. The actual pace of urbanization started after the establishment of the French settlement. The growth of the city may be divided into three:

- i. Pre-French Phase (before 1673)
- ii. Phase of the French rule (1673 – 1952)
- iii. Post- Independent Phase (1952 to the present)

Pre-French Phase (Before 1673):

The development of the city started in 16th century from the village Khalisani, located on the bank of Saraswati River, once fast flowing but now abandoned channel of the Bhagirathi which then facilitates as an easy route of fleets engaged in export and import of commodities to and fro the port Saptagram and Bazra. The present city originated from three villages: Boro, Gondolpara and Khalisani with a striking similarity to the case of Kolkata, Sutanuti and Gobindapur for Calcutta's origin. The villages then were large enough and densely populated and were engaged in export and import of goods from Arab, China, Maldives, Tibet, and Europe etc. The fertile lands on the sides of the river Saraswati had good agricultural productivity which also triggered the export of agro-based commodities (Seth, 1924:779-791).

The River Saraswati experienced its low ebb in the sixteenth century, and larger volume of water of the Bhagirathi began to flow through the present Hooghly channel. Saptagram port became the worst sufferer and was forced to shift the trade route from river Saraswati to river Hooghly (Majumdar, 1971:04). Settlements started

to grow on the banks of Hooghly River as the strip attracted large number of settlers intended to be engaged in trade and commerce. Two temples of ‘*Chandi*’ and ‘*Bisalakshmi*’ developed with the patronage of the cultivators and labourers in the northern part of Chandernagore which gained more importance from these rich traders and favoured Chandernagore to emerge as a temple town at the very first phase of its urbanization (O’Malley, 1912: 259, Seth, 1924: 779-791).

The Phase of the French Rule (1673 – 1952)

The Portuguese are credited to be the first European power who started their trade in Hugli in seventeenth century, followed by the Dutch, the French, the British, the German and the Danes who established their trading centres in the west bank of the River Hooghly. In consideration of space, the French built a *kuthi* in Boro-Kisanpur in north Chandernagore in 1673 possessing only 10 arpents (a French unit of area) of land (Mitra, 1948: 996). The French East India Company managed permission for free trade from the Nawab of Bengal in 1693 and extended their *kuthi* area and established a port in Chandernagore to expand trade. They built *Fort de Orien* in 1696. Water transport combined with land transport facility of the Grand Trunk road stimulated expansion of trade and urbanization in Chandernagore (Seth, 1925: 898-909). Gradually, new settlements received the extension of the French security and the city acquired a cosmopolitan character. The City was annexed with the administrative control of Ponduchery in 1701; however, a plan of urbanization was achieved by that time. Urbanization experienced rapid pace from the early 18th century in the time of Dupleix. Urbanization was started from the north Chandernagore and was expanded to the south (Gondolpara) by the Danes, who left *Dinemardanga* in 1755. Dupleix constructed the arsenal, shop of French East India Company and dug a ditch surrounding the colony by 1730. The period between 1730 –1755 experienced rapid urbanization and expansion of trade.

In 1753 Chandernagore was inhabited by 6180 families with 25, 722 population of which 12, 228 were male and 13, 494 were female. But the pace could not be retained as Dupleix returned to Pondicherry in 1741. Chandernagore was captured by the British East India Company in 1757. The French lost their military power and independence in Bengal along with fortification of the town and demolishing of many houses. From 1757 to 1816, the town gained experience of destruction of old and construction of new architectural tests (O’Malley, 1912: 80-87; Sen, 1934: 63-71).

The French administration paid continuous attention to its development for nearly 130 years. New settlements always were built on the west of the G.T. Road. In the later part of the 1854,

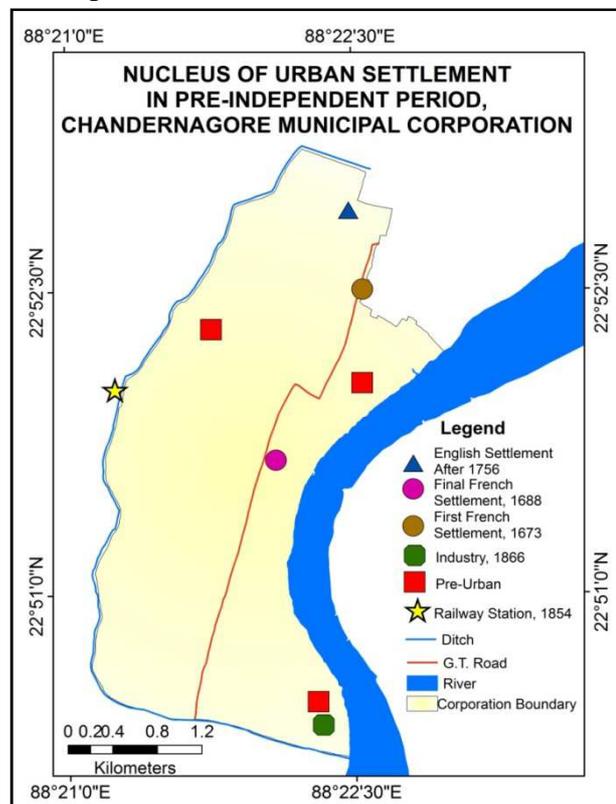


Fig: 2 Sources: Seth, 1924; Sen, 1958; CMC, 2012-2017

the East India Railway (Eastern Railway) traversed the town from the western end and a Railway station was set up which served as a growth pole in the west. Urbanization soon extended along both sides of the road connecting the station and the Down Town area (Rashbihari Avenue). The Laxmiganj Bajar developed during this time which shifted the growth pole towards north. The Jute mill set up in 1866 near Gondolpara became the third growth pole. Thus from 1820 to the present, the urban growth of Chandernagore took place in three sides resembling a triangle, Gondolpara in the south, Taldanga in the north and Chandernagore Railway station or Khalisani in the west (Fig: 2). The question is that whether the growth considered the ecological conditions recommended in urban model fit for such an area (Sen, 1934: 63-71, Seth, 1925: 898-909, Seth, 1924: 779-791).

The old parts of the city still bear proofs that the French East India Company (FEIC) made efforts to make it a systematic planned city. They constructed a number of roads running parallel to each other and connected to the main roads, important offices, police headquarters, prisons and places of recreation. Even the lanes and the bye-lanes were connected with the main road. The FEIC divided the town into two cultural parts: *Ville Noire*, the residences of the Africans, Moors and the natives on west of GT Road, and *Ville Blache*, the residence of the Europeans on the east. The French encircled the city in 1767-69 by a ditch for their protection along with a well-organized sewerage system (Kar, 1931: 48-51).

A fusion of occidental and oriental culture is still evident in the city. Occidental pattern of urban structure remained in *Blache* area and oriental culture prevailed in *Noire* area, guided by colonial outlook. The French established different recreation centres in *Blache* area like Cabaret Hall, Gambling house, Hotel, parks and gardens. There was discrepancy in tax system and slave trade, e.g. European had to pay 5% sales tax on slave trade where as the natives had to pay more. Variable tax systems like *kayali*, *parakai*, *choukhai* etc were introduced. The FEIC extended privileges to the Europeans in trade and land tenure system, for exaple, the French had to pay 1.5 *sicca taka/ bigha/* year but the natives 2.5 *sicca taka/ bigha/* year as land revenue (Seth, 1924: 627-633).

In respect of trade and commerce, Chandernagore ranked top among all the trading centres of Bengal in 1740s, when Calcutta trailed far behind. It maintained trade relations with Balasore, Bussora, Mocha, Pondicherry, Maldives, China, Pegu, Jedda, Tibet and a number of European countries; the export items being the local manufactures. The principal commodities of export were linen, wine, sandalwood, paraffin, silk, maslin, rice, indigo, spices etc. A number of markets and local *haats* were established in this purpose, of which Laksmiganj, Hatkhola etc. have more or less retained their legacy (Seth, 1925: 898-909).

A number of Schools were established in this phase, of which French and English convent schools for boys and girls as well as Sanskrit and vernacular schools were patronized by the rulers. The Christian played a vital role in spread of education in the city. The erstwhile Dupleix College, earlier known as St. Mary's Institution (*Ecole de St. Marie*) and presently Chandernagore College extended higher education to the people. All these buildings added specific identity to landscape of the city (Seth, 1924: 779-791).

De Facto and De Jure transfer of Power to Rule (1947 to 1954)

The French Government declared Chandernagore as a free city in 1947 and gave more power to *Sasan Parishad*. In June 1948, the French Govt. sought people's

opinion to decide the status of the city. About 97% of the people voted for merger of Chandernagore with India. In May 1950, the French made a *de facto* transfer of Chandernagore to the India Govt. On 2nd February, 1951, they made *de jure* transfer which was approved by the French Republican Society on 11th April, 1952. On 30th June 1952, the then president of India Dr. Rajendra Prasad took the responsibility of the administration of Chandernagore.

After the inclusion of Chandernagore within India, now it was the time for annexation of the city with West Bengal because still it holds an autonomous body for the Past French Legacy like Pondicherry. That's why the Govt. of India formed a commission under the leadership of Dr. Amarnath Jha to know the opinion of the people of Chandernagore. The Jha Commission presented its report in 1953 and in 1954 decision was taken by the Parliament. At last on 29th September 1954 Chandernagore Merger Act was sanctioned and on 2nd October 1954, Chandernagore was merged with West Bengal as a Sub Division. After the annexation Chandernagore has been considered as a part of Hooghly district and a Sub-divisional city of West Bengal.

In 1955 Chandernagore Municipal Act was passed in Legislative Assembly of West Bengal and on 1st September 1955, it gained the status of Municipal Corporation. It is one of the six Municipal Corporations of West Bengal. (<http://www.chandernagoremunicipalcorporation.in/Content.aspx?ID=History>).

Post- Independent Phase: (1952 to the Present)

The city covered an area of 9.66 km² with 27 Wards in 1991. After 1994, an area of 12.37 km² has been added to the city by transfer from Khalisani Gram Panchayat. The city now covers an area of 22.03 km² with 33 Wards.

Renewal/ Extension:

Bagbazar, Borobazar, Fatokgora, Hatkhola, Lichutala, Jyoti, Mankundu Station Area, Sitalatala, Delhi Road More, Khalisani College Area are those localities

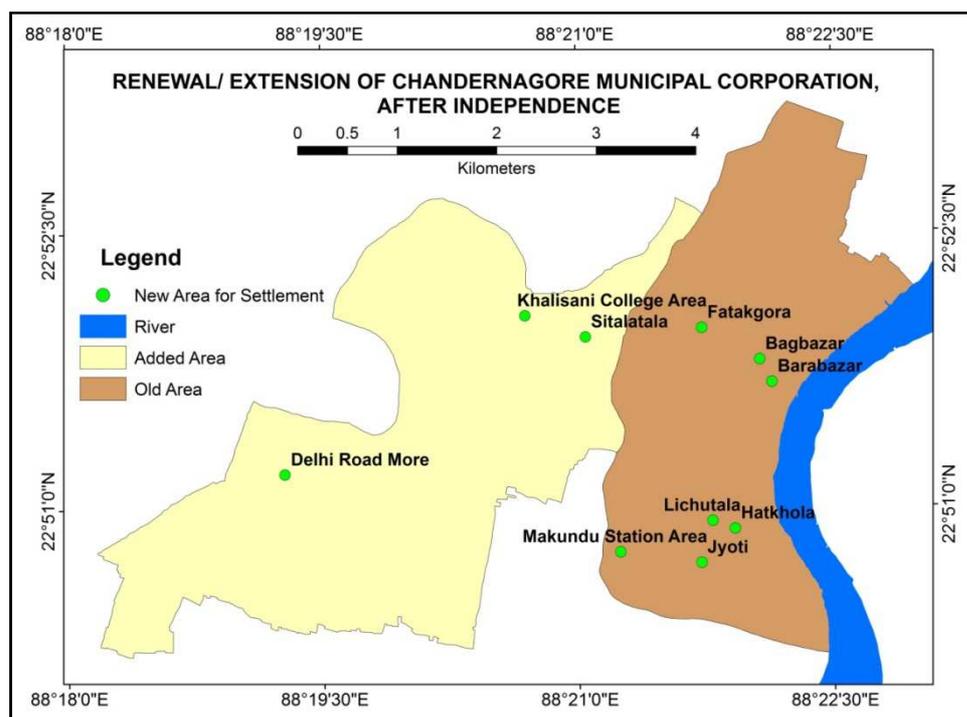


Fig: 3

Source: Prepared by the authors

where new built up areas with modern structure of buildings are taking place very quickly, whereas, in Haridradanga, Boxigoli, Boraichanditala etc. are the places where the residents still retain their legacy of old culture, rituals and heritage. Many old style buildings are still existent in this part (Fig: 3). Urdibazar, Nichupati, Tinbazar, parts of Gondalpara, Mahadanga are the main slum areas of the city.

The growth factors:

- ❖ Its cultural heritage, calm and quite pleasant environment attracted people.
- ❖ Chandernagore is a Sub-Divisional head quarter and hence it offered a better facility of good educational institutions, district library, good medical facility, administrative facility etc. to its citizens.
- ❖ It is an important commercial centre of Hooghly district from earlier time.
- ❖ The city is very close to Kolkata (just 30 kilometers north) that helped its growth as a residential suburb of Kolkata. People unable to afford for residence in Kolkata or who tend to leave in a less congested area, they settled in and around Chandernagore.
- ❖ Good transport and communication system of the city. The Howrah- Bandel main railway line, Grand Trunk road, Delhi road and other roads connecting those main arteries offer a better accessibility (both intra and intercity) to the resident.
- ❖ Chandernagore also enjoys a scenic beauty because of its river-side shape location and also have comparatively a controlled political and social condition which helps the city to grow.

Population Growth of the City:

The growth of population in Chandernagore Municipal Corporation (CMC) since independence shows remarkable ups and down for many reasons. The following diagram reveals the nature of population growth of Chandernagore Municipal Corporation (Fig: 4). High growth rate of population continued up to 1961. People started to migrate to this newly added town in large numbers. As Chandernagore started its journey from the beginning of the freedom as Corporation it held better position in terms of development and administration rather than its surroundings. So it played the role of a growth engine to the surrounding villages which further served as a pull factor.

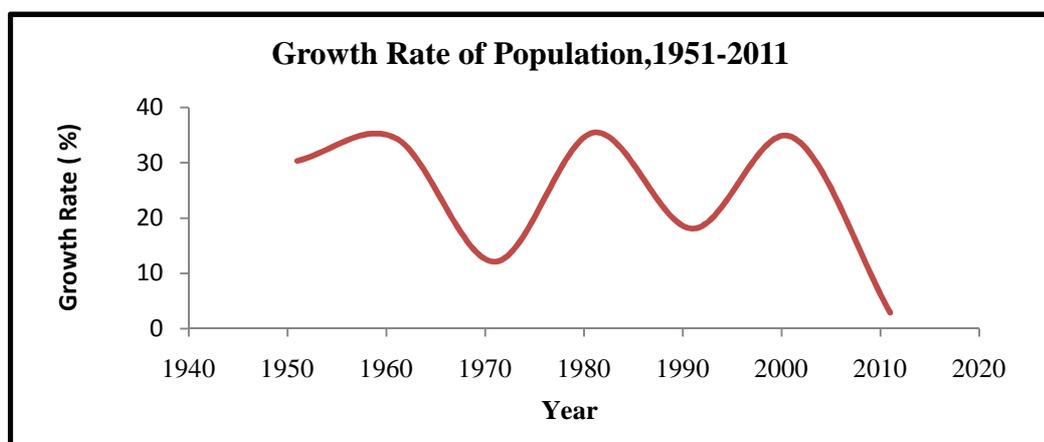


Fig: 4

Source: Census of India, 1951-2011

Again a growth has been seen after the Bangladesh war for freedom; lots of people immigrated to various areas of West Bengal and Chandernagore was not an exception. Then the city acquired a steady growth up to 2001. The cause of sudden upward trend of growth of population in 2001 resulted in the incorporation of six new wards within the city boundary which increased the population of the city along with areal expansion. During 2001 to 2011, the growth rate of population experienced a decreasing trend, probably due to low rate of natural growth of population and a controlled rate of immigration.

Socio-Economic Environment:

Chandernagore Municipal Corporation experiences long history of development rooted in colonial legacy. The socio-economic conditions of the city have been changed in different phases from colonial time to the present. At the very first stage growth of the city was facilitated by the River Hooghly as the route of transport of vessels and later on this growth was enhanced by the developing connectivity both by roadways and railways.

CMC is a Class-I city as per the Census of India, having a population of 1,66,867 with the density of 7537 persons / km² (Census, 2011). The population density is very high in Ward no. 6 and 11, due to its locational proximity to the periphery of CBD. High rate of immigration and concentration of the slum population is higher in these two wards. In old Chandernagore, except Ward no. 15 the population density is high enough than the added area. Ward no. 31 and 33, in the newly extended area have now

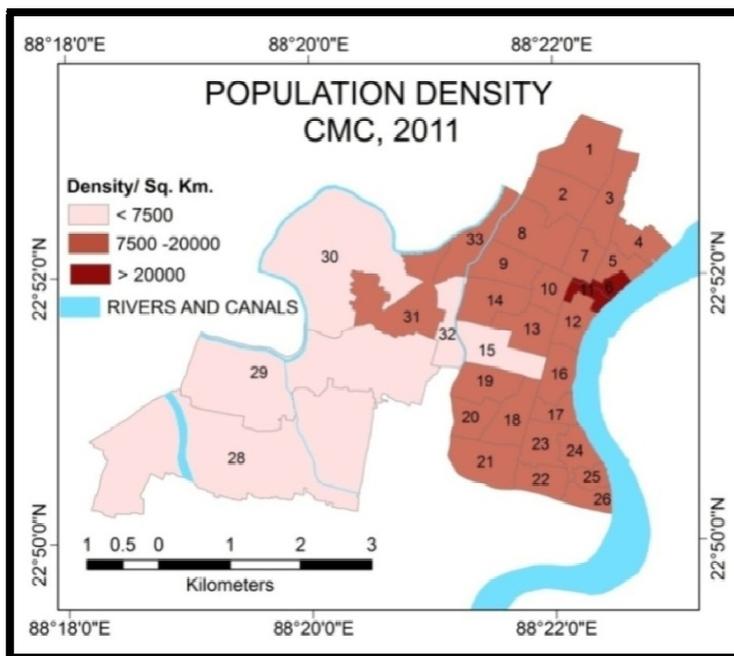


Fig: 5 Source: Census, 2011

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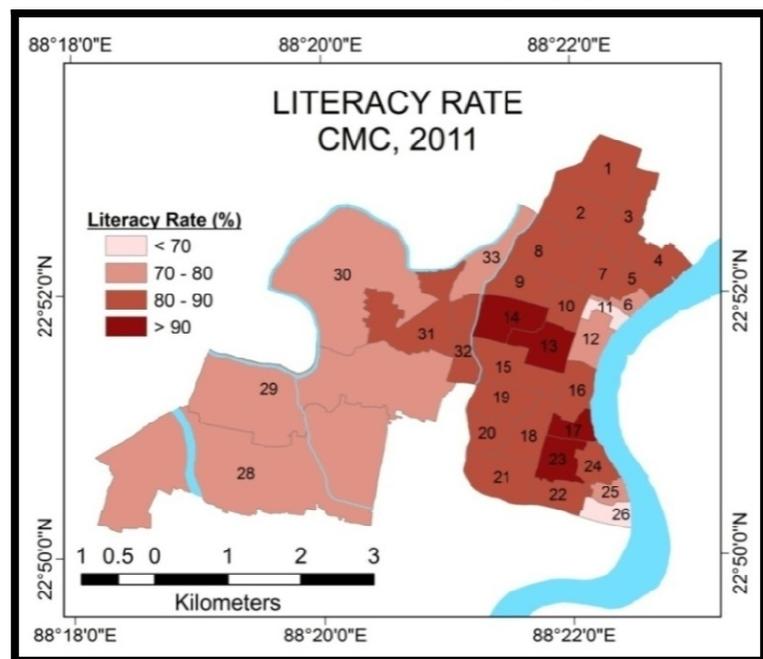


Fig: 6 Source: Census, 2011

experienced the influence of urban sprawl. Other wards have low population density as these wards have been merged with Chandernagore city in 1994 and the basic activities are primary and secondary. The main economies of the city are trade, commerce and other tertiary activities. Due to better transportation system the city is a place of daily commuters among the places of greater Kolkata.

The average literacy rate of Chandernagore city is higher than the state's average. Only two wards (Ward no. 11 and 26) have less than 70% literacy rate probably because of greater concentration of slum population and immigrants. In old Chandernagore, Ward no. 6, 12 and 26 show medium literacy rate due to concentration of slum population and immigrants. On contrary, Ward no. 28, 29, 30 and 33 in the newly added part of the city, have medium density as these wards are dominated by the primary and secondary activities. The other words have high and very high literacy rate as these wards are inhabited by the daily commuters and the elite class of population (Fig: 6).

A Non-Agriculture based Urbanization of the City:

Chandernagore is a riverside town (situated at the west bank of Hooghly River); its economy is not based on agriculture. Only 10-15% of the total population engaged in agriculture. All the cultivate lands and the agro-based economy are developed in the west side of the Chandernagore Railway station. Agricultural land comprises such wards like- Ward no. 28, 29 and 30 where mixed economy still prevails (Fig: 7).

The non-agro based urbanization is evident in the eastern side of the railway station, just beside the river. From the French period, its economy is totally dependent upon urban actions i.e. trade and commercial activities like – household industry (weaving), administrative works, institutionalization etc. Urbanization of Chandernagore at present is mainly driven by the service sector.

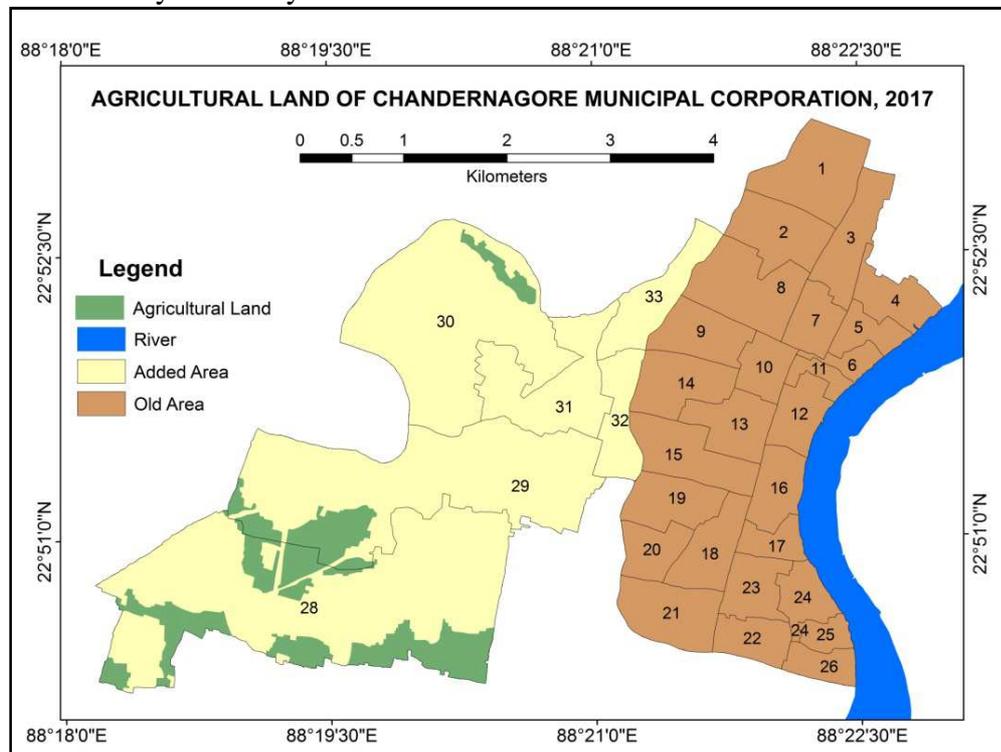


Fig: 7

Source: Prepared by authors

Findings:

1. Compared to French 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.
2. Chandernagore, peculiarly enough, cannot boast of a history of a sustained anti-colonial movement against French rule. Instead, French-ruled Chandernagore became a shelter for the anti-British revolutionaries from Bengal.
3. After the establishment of the Railway station in 1854 Chandernagore saw a population explosion. A drastic change in population took place as the region is developed by the French Colonial Empires.
4. Development in communication system has facilitated the overall development in Chandernagore Municipal Corporation.
5. In the recent time, the Neo-Capitalist approach is seen in CMC. In colonial Era, the capitalists were interested only in the trade and commerce. But now a day, it has been changed; the capitalists are interested in the real-estate business, which is very harmful to the colonial heritage and structures.
6. Most of the private colonial structures are demolished and in those places new high rising buildings have grown up. The town is increasing vertically rather than horizontally.
7. It is also found that the Colonial Property or Structures which were known as religious places still remain as it was.
8. Many of the Colonial structures are being renovated and as a result, many Colonial sculptures have been ruined.
9. In some places, the old and the new structure have been coexisting together, e.g., surrounding the Chandernagore Strand the French structure and the Modern structure have been seen together.
10. One of the major finding is that, in Chandernagore, peculiarly enough, the French administration (western culture) is abstained from intervention in the local culture. The French speaking Bengali population seems to have been minimal. It is because of the areal differentiation between the *ville blanche* and *ville noire*. But in contrast, present day culture of Chandernagore shows another picture; about 80% of the people are influenced and globalised by the western culture.

Conclusion:

It can be concluded on the basis of the above discussion that Chandernagore as an urban centre possesses a number of unique characteristics. Modern development has brought some specific problems, sometimes different from the other cities such as changes in the cultural tastes, especially in views of architectural specialty and cultural exposition. Though, the last aspect is in general proved dynamic for any other cities passing through time. The physical extension of the city did not spare the spaces needed to be conserved for its ecological benefits. Settlements and other buildings have been extended wherever and whatever land was available, ultimately culminating into congestion of roads and houses even posing obstacles to free movement of air. The city needs a suitable management plan which can still retain the unique old characteristics of the city.

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