

MAPPING CALCUTTA

The Collection of Maps
at the Visual Archives of the
Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta

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02

Archive series



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The collection of maps on the city of Calcutta¹ at the Archives of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, has grown gradually over the years, not in a very planned manner, because of the very nature of the sources – widely dispersed, and often unknown. The collection is representative of the vast array of maps and plans of a diverse nature, both in the manuscript and printed versions. Beginning in the early eighteenth century and covering a period ranging roughly over two and a half centuries, these maps exist in the libraries, archives, and other institutional, as well as private collections.



Cartographic sources in India primarily constitute institutional collections basically because these were in the majority of cases produced institutionally and have served in their times certain institutional agenda. Original prints and reproductions have been acquired from the National Archives of India, New Delhi, the National Library, the Victoria Memorial, the Directorate of Land Records, Government of West Bengal, the National Atlas and Thematic Mapping Organisation at Calcutta, the British Museum, London, and from private collections and map dealers.

An important part of the collection constitutes original printed maps. Noteworthy amongst these are maps produced for purposes of revenue assessment in the early twentieth century – well known as Smart's survey,

possibly the most detailed of the large-scale surveys undertaken on the city and its urban periphery. Over hundred years have passed since this survey, but such a venture has remained unreplicated, and still remains perhaps the most important of all surveys on Calcutta. A map produced by the 'Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge' in 1842, and two maps based on the surveys conducted under the aegis of the Survey of India, the first between 1887 and 1894, the second in 1943 are also part of the original

printed maps in the collection. There are also reproductions of original maps published between 1742 and 1914, reproduced in different forms: photocopies, scanned prints, microfilms, etc. The few maps of the post-independence period are original printed versions such as topographical sheets of the Survey of India, maps published by the National Atlas and Thematic Mapping Organisation, and other endeavours in thematic cartography for popular use.

Town plans and maps have had an uninterrupted history of growth since the inception of colonialism in the Indian subcontinent, with port cities becoming some of the most mapped sites. With the English establishing their foothold in the three presidencies of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta,

A section of the map "The Provinces of Bengal situated on the West of the Hooghly River: With the Maharatta Frontier. Inscribed to Harry Verelst Esq. By his obliged humble servant J.Rennel", from 'An Atlas of Bengal and Bahar', 1781, reprinted in B.P.Ambasthya (ed) *James Rennell's Memoir of a Map of Hindustan or the Mughal Empire and his Bengal Atlas*, 1781, reprinted in N.V. Publications, Patna, 1975.

by virtue of its importance to colonial powers, Calcutta became one of the most mapped cities of colonial India.

The majority of such productions, quite expectedly, were officially sponsored. From the late eighteenth century, with the establishment of the Survey of India, most survey and mapping operations got centralised. There were private endeavours as well, but far fewer in comparison.

The history of cartography of the city of Calcutta is almost coterminous with the history of British endeavours in mapping the city. This history dates back to the year 1742, as far as we have been able to trace, if one leaves out the conjectural maps of the late seventeenth century that illustrated the three riverine settlements of Sutanuti, Kalikata and Govindapur that were to constitute the future city of Calcutta. The first known British map of the city, *Plan of Calcutta*, was published in 1742. Mapping continued for almost the next two centuries, with the patrons of these cartographic ventures belonging primarily to the various branches of the colonial administration. The production of maps on the city therefore very clearly coincides with the changing requirements of colonial power, the purposes of survey differing from one to the other. Each survey is a reflection of either a particular historical event or a phase in urban planning. There were nevertheless a few exceptions.

Calcutta is still being mapped. Yet, one sees a marked departure, quite understandably, both in the form and in the content, between mapping ventures in the colonial and the post-independence phases. In the Map Archives of

CSSSC, we have consciously made an effort to collect historical maps of Calcutta, difficult to access normally. This is reflected in the text that follows. Of the contemporary cartographic productions, a few examples from the collection have been touched upon, especially the new genre of schematic representations that we have come across in the recent past.

The range of maps on Calcutta/Kolkata accessed at the CSSSC archives includes interesting binaries: between the indigenous and the British/western, between colonial and post-colonial, between officially sponsored and private endeavours, between 'scientific' cartography and 'schematic' plans, and so on. With few exceptions, each representative of the respective genres in cartographic production.

Interestingly, in spite of the prevalence of a vast reserve of indigenous/ traditional cartographic ventures produced on several regions as well as on urban centres in the Indian subcontinent, Calcutta finds almost no representation in spite of the known intellectual traditions in Bengal. An exception is a unique endeavour in cartographic representation - Romanauth Dass's *Kalikatar Manchitra*, a map-cum guidebook produced in the vernacular in 1884.

Representative examples of cartographic ventures on the city, from the pre-colonial phase to the present would throw some light on the varied array of maps and plans that have been perceived, surveyed and produced on the growing metropolis.

The selection of maps discussed below is representational of distinct thematic categories of cartographic production. They do not necessarily conform to any chronological sequence.

Mapping the Colonial City

The middle of the seventeenth century was known to set off a period in which scientific enquiry and technological practice was pressed into the service of the state. The institutions sponsoring cartographic productions in different parts of Europe were attaining greater significance. Maps were being prepared in the political field for the demarcation of frontiers, in the economic sphere for property assessment and revenue, and also for use in various branches of the administration.

The early maps published on India, especially in the pre-Survey of India phase were known to be 'rudimentary in character', and in the main prepared by early travellers. Maps and plans, mostly results of reconnaissances, route sketches, undertaken to assist or illustrate military operations were also reflective of this period². The initial phases of colonial domination were marked generally by the preparation of regional plans.

The Colonial City: The Fort as an Identity

Much of historical urban cartography is intrinsically linked with military strategy and planning with central importance given to fortification and the defence of the city.³ Calcutta is no exception. The earliest plans of Calcutta were made by engineers for purposes of defence and the layout of fortifications. The advent of British colonisation marked by the construction of the Old Fort in the heart of the city illustrated a definitive cartographic image of the city for more

than a century, till it was succeeded by the Fort William.

Cartographic productions focusing on Calcutta made their appearance through a series of plans of the Old Fort and the area around it. The first of this series, also known to be the first map of Calcutta is a *Plan of Calcutta in 1742, showing the Seven Batteries*.

Between 1742 and 1757, a series of officially sponsored plans were prepared on the Old Fort. Many of these plans form part of the

Plan of Calcutta in 1742, showing the Seven Batteries, Victoria Memorial, Calcutta

