The great houses of Kolkata 1750- 2006

Author:
Taylor, Joanne Lea

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UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

THE GREAT HOUSES OF KOLKATA
1750 – 2006

JOANNE LEA TAYLOR

A thesis submitted in fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of the Built Environment by Research

Faculty of the Built Environment

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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ABSTRACT

British colonial rule in India provided opportunities for certain indigenous groups to profit in both wealth and status. With the rise of the East India Company in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) during the eighteenth century, the mainly Hindu merchant class embraced British rule in many ways, a significant and lasting one is the architecture of their residential mansions and palaces, known as the Great Houses. This study traces the architectural history of these buildings through the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries and examines the style that developed as a consequence.

The main objectives of the thesis are to demonstrate that:

1. The architecture and style of the Great Houses of Kolkata's indigenous elites were inspired by their colonial experience.
2. Despite the British architectural models available during the colonial period, the Great Houses feature hybrid designs and eclectic architectural forms. The thesis examines the meaning behind this anomaly.
3. The Great Houses embody a particular time and place in the history of Kolkata and are unique. They are part of Kolkata's heritage.
4. In spite of the influence of British colonial rule, traditional Hindu ways of life continued unabated in the private domains of the Great Houses.
5. Their rise and decline parallels the socio-economic and political history of Kolkata.

The thesis approaches the complex reasons behind the transition and decline of the Great Houses by examining the history and architecture of these buildings in a chronologically linear order, beginning in 1757 with the Battle of Plassey, the political changes of the nineteenth century, and the subsequent relative decline of the importance of Bengal in the twentieth century to focus on the relevance of the Great Houses in the twenty first century.

The research has been undertaken on a number of levels. Primary and secondary sources have been used, both colonial and post Independence, in India and Australia. These methods have been supplemented by archival material including drawings of plans, by interviews with descendents of the Great Families, historians and architects in Kolkata and by an extensive photographic documentation of the houses as they are today.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Krishna Dutta, when asked to name the one particular sight that sums up Kolkata answered;

> 'The decaying mansions of the babus, who were the rich, British-influenced Indian gentry. They were built in a medley of architectural styles that V.S. Naipaul calls 'Calcutta Corinthian' and are unique.'

> Dutta, author of 'Calcutta, a Cultural and Literary History'

Kolkata's mercantile class enjoyed the patronage of the British from around the 1750's to 1900, but particularly strongly during the second half of the eighteenth century[1]. This initial relationship was complex and relatively short-lived. The growing aspirations of the upwardly mobile merchants, however, became more visible by the nineteenth century with the building of the Great Houses of the mercantile families-the city's Great Families. Today there are very few in anything like their original condition and many are in a state of decay; others have disappeared entirely. After sixty years of Independence, and as India begins to look at its colonial past in new ways, this study on the transition of the Great Houses is timely. Unless attention is given to them, they will not survive much longer.

In addition to Kolkata's well known British architecture, the indigenous merchants that acquired their fortune by associating with the British built hybrid mansions and palaces that were clearly inspired by British architecture and the indigenous merchant's colonial experiences. These Indian buildings represent a unique period in the architectural and cultural history of the city and can be seen as a symbol of these experiences and the visible reminder of a people who aspired, adapted and prospered

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[1] In July, 1999, the West Bengal State Assembly voted unanimously to rename Calcutta Kolkata, and West Bengal, Bangla. This decision follows Bombay's renaming to Mumbai and Madras to Chennai. As the purpose of this study is to reveal new ways of seeing colonial rule from the perspective of the indigenous elites in order to raise an awareness of architectural heritage issues, the newer spelling, Kolkata, will be used for Calcutta.

under colonial rule. While the British colonial architecture in Kolkata has been widely, although not completely, documented, the mansions and palaces of the city's mercantile class are largely unknown, and no systematic study of them has really been made. This study begins to fill an intellectual gap in the study of both Kolkata and India's architectural history. Ironically, the success of the Great Families under colonial rule led to their decline after Independence, evident in the condition of the Great Houses today.

The Great Families of Kolkata have experienced enormous changes of fortune. During colonial rule they were the wealthiest and most influential of Kolkata's indigenous population. Although their fortunes have seen a downward spiral, some families have managed to remain in their ancestral homes, despite pressure from developers for them to sell and move to newer, less crowded areas of Kolkata. These remaining homes, (like similar houses in other colonial cities in India and other parts of the world), and the families, embody tradition and culture and can only be understood in their historical context.

Colonial Kolkata's past can be divided into three periods; pre-Imperial, Imperial and post-Independence. Although officially disputed, Kolkata as we know it can be said to have been established in 1690 by Job Charnock of the East India Company, who first set up a modest factory, which then became a significant trading and military outpost and was later transformed into a political centre. Early British factories or forts in India were multinational. Trade was the main objective and people of different races and religions, such as the Bengalis in Kolkata, were encouraged to settle around the British outposts, which in Kolkata was Fort William. It was only later that the population became segregated.

The British victory at Plassey in 1757 served as a turning point in establishing Kolkata. The Indian Rebellion of 1857 (also known as the First War of Indian Independence, the Sepoy Rebellion and the Indian Mutiny) brought about the end of the British East India Company's rule in India and led to direct rule by the British government (now known as the British Raj) over much of the Indian subcontinent for the next ninety years; the Imperial Period.

The Raj came to an end at midnight, on the 15th of August 1947 and India emerged as a unified nation state, although at the expense of the partition of the country into India and Pakistan. The architecture of the Imperial period, and Britain's obvious ideological imperatives, has been thoroughly documented yet, apart from Evenson, (1989), Battacharyya (2002) and Chattopadhyay (2005) the 100-250 year old mansions and palaces that demonstrate the taste and lifestyle of the city's entrepreneurial indigenous merchants, bankers and landowners have gone largely unrecorded. Although many Great Houses have disappeared entirely, others exist in varying condition.

- A number of houses, whose owners have been unable to maintain them, have been abandoned.
- Some are rented as a whole or in part to multiple tenants.
- Most have been subject to improvised and makeshift alterations.
- Many sites have been diminished by the sale of their surrounding land and gardens.
- Sections have been sold or donated to the Kolkata Municipal Corporation.
- Parts have been divided by bricking up halls and stairways to provide separate accommodation for various branches of the family.
- Some have been taken over by educational and medical institutes.

English language histories of India have largely been written by British writers. Giles Tillotson writes of the problems and conceptions inherent in the study of India's architecture, and the ways it has been, and ways in which it might be, thought about. Histories on Kolkata have mainly been concerned with it's hey day; the period of British colonialism between the mid-eighteenth and the end of the nineteenth centuries, the time frame with which this thesis is mainly concerned. These histories have, however, concentrated on the buildings and urban spaces created by the British which were designed to dominate the landscape to symbolise Britain's power in India. These buildings constructed an image to the western world that Kolkata was a 'city of palaces', built entirely by the British rulers and traders. They also set a new standard in colonial Kolkata for what was considered 'good taste' amongst the colonial elite.

James Ferguson in his book *The History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (1876) considered that unless designs for buildings in British colonies adhered to European building principles they were 'false' or a 'mistake'. These histories of India and its architecture entirely missed the contribution made to the development of Kolkata by the indigenous population.

Indigenous scholarly writing on Indian architecture has mainly been concerned with ancient texts and with documenting religious buildings and forts. The ancient texts, known collectively as *silpa-sastra* [2] (see Chapter Four for more on the influence of *silpa-sastras* on the designs of the Great Houses), were based on ancient theoretical, esoteric and religious tenets, with little descriptive or analytical assessment of any extant buildings other than temples and religious complexes. Before, during and after the colonial period art-historical scholarship by Indian patriots, pioneering British and indigenous archaeologists, art historians and their Indian associates investigating India's architectural history were also essentially based on foreign models of scholarships, even when written by Indians themselves (Tillotson 1998, p. 1).

More recent advances in Indian historiography have opened new areas of understanding India's past and present. Colonial and post colonial times are now being approached at different analytical levels, challenging existing ideas on the history of India. New indigenous approaches to interpreting Kolkata's architectural history by scholars such as Swati Chattopadhyay (2005) and Monolina Battacharyya (2002) are based more on India's own historical and ideological contexts than Britain's. This thesis has however, been written as an outsider.

By taking into account the limitations of former scholarship and focussing instead on shifting the interest from the British to the neglected area of Kolkata's indigenous built environment, this study sheds new light on Kolkata's architectural and social history by describing and analysing the interconnections between the designs of the Great Houses and colonial rule. It must, nevertheless, be stated that this study having been made by an outsider, may therefore be criticised as falling within Orientalist traditions. Indeed it focuses on a topic that Indian scholars have deemed unimportant. Be that as it may, the study has been undertaken with care, the best intentions and an awareness of how it might be perceived. In addition, a previous, light-hearted publication on the same subject published in India in 2006 by the same author, received a genuinely positive response from current Indian historians. However, it is impossible to hope for complete accuracy of the histories and biographies of families and individuals in this study as some of the material has been supplied by the families

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[2] Also spelt *shilpa sastra*

concerned and memories can fail us and interpretations may be misleading. In particular the handing down of oral histories is open to reinvention.

The focus of attention

There are twenty Great Houses of the indigenous merchant class in Kolkata that were considered for the study, however, nine will be described, each chosen as being representative of either a particular architectural style, era or a place. These buildings have been made available for the study by the owners, making their examination as complete and up to date as possible. The buildings begin with the 1756 Palace of Raja Nabakrishna to 1904 with the Palace of the Burdwan Raj. In addition, a number of other indigenous residential buildings have been used to highlight details as needed.

By drawing on a cross section of disciplines the study examines the transition of their residential palaces and mansions, their architecture and the society that developed around them. The examination verifies the correlation between the colonial experiences of Kolkata's wealthy merchants and the condition and relevance of their residential palaces today.

The importance of the study

The importance of this study is twofold. Firstly, the majority of Kolkata's extant Great Houses, the residences of the city's former indigenous elites who benefited from British patronage during the colonial period, are in a severe state of decay and at risk of declining even further. As there has been no previous in-depth study or photo-documentation on them, the thesis will, if nothing else preserve a record of the houses for posterity, thus making a contribution to both Kolkata and India's architectural history. Secondly, as India embraces technology, the city of Kolkata still bears the scars of much of India's problems; poverty, overpopulation, pollution and traffic congestion. Heritage and conservation in India is looked on by many as a luxury only wealthy countries can afford. However, after sixty years of Independence, the restoration of a number of British colonial buildings in Kolkata shows the city has begun to see its colonial past in a number of new ways. By presenting the condition of the Great Houses today, this study will argue for the need to conserve the remaining ones if a significant part of the city's heritage is to be saved.

This chapter now turns to the ways in which scholars of Kolkata's architectural history have identified colonial Kolkata by its British architecture while neglecting the significant collection of monumental residential architecture of the Indian elites during that time. In addition, it will show that a visual representation of the Great Houses, by British and Indian artists and photographers, has been limited, both in colonial times and the present. This lack emphasizes the photographic importance of the study. Lastly this study will create an awareness of the overall neglect in regard to the Great Houses (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2).

Figure 1.1. *Left*. a staircase, the Andul Palace in 2005. Figure 1.2. *Right*, a courtyard, the Datta family's Great House in 2006.

The overall neglect of architectural and historical scholarship

To date there has been surprisingly little scholarship on the Great Houses of Kolkata by either European or Indian architectural historians. Studies on indigenous architecture in India have primarily focussed on the Mughal architecture of northern India and the palaces of the ruling classes, traditional Hindu temples, mosques, forts and tombs. Much has been written on modern architecture. There are a vast number of records, histories and depictions of Kolkata's British administrative and residential architecture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Few scholars have attempted a study of the residential architecture of Kolkata's indigenous merchant class and their Great Houses. Comments have been made on them largely in passing. J.P. Losty refers to the residences in his book, *Calcutta, City of Palaces*; 'The buildings show the influence of English classical taste on that of the wealthier Bengalis, which forms

one of the most interesting but unexplored chapters of the history of the British in Bengal' (Losty 1990, p. 49). This study is an exploration of the unexplored.

All writers on Kolkata's architectural history neglect a scholarly investigation of the Great Houses. British scholar H.E. Busteed's book *Echoes from Old Calcutta*, 1897, makes no mention of the native Indian population. Instead, and typical of the era, the study is very much an Imperialist's view, focussed on the lives and lifestyles of the British during colonial times. Kolkata's great historian, N.K. Sinha's work, *The History of Bengal, (1757–1905)*, does include Kolkata's historical background, details of colonial rule and the rise of the merchant class and the social changes which affected the founders of the Great Houses. Despite these references to their influence and the powerful roles they played in the running of the British colonial system, there is no reference to their Great Houses.

These buildings are also neglected in later studies which focus entirely on the city's history and development through the architecture of Kolkata's British colonial administration buildings and the ways in which its classical architecture was used to symbolise colonial power. It must be mentioned that despite the size and opulence of the Great Houses, the previous term for Kolkata as a 'City of Palaces' (see Figure 1.3) has always referred directly to the British government and administration buildings, and the homes of the British elite, not the mansions and palaces of the Indian elites.

Figure 1.3. James Baillie Fraser, 'A View of Government House from the Eastward', 1819. from Fraser's *Views of Calcutta and its Environs*, London, 1824-6; 28 x 42.5.Source, Losty, 1990, Plate 15.

The title of Losty's volume, *Calcutta, City of Palaces, 1690 – 1858*, (1990), refers to a Kolkata of earlier times which was known as a 'city of palaces'. Losty's book

includes the following poem written by James Atkinson in 1824, reputably the first time the word 'palaces' is used to describe the European buildings of Kolkata;

But we here behold
A prodigy of power, transcending all
The conquests, and the governments, of old,
An empire of the Sun, a gorgeous realm of gold.
For us in half a century, India blooms
The garden of Hesperides, and we
Placed in its porch, Calcutta, with its tombs
And dazzling splendours, towering peerlessly,
May taste its sweets, yet bitters too there be
Under attractive seeming. Drink again
The frothy draft, and revel joyously;
From the gay round of pleasure, why refrain!
Thou'rt on the brink of pleasure, why refrain!
Thou'rt on the brink of death, luxuriate on thy bane.
I stood a wandering stranger at the Ghaut,
And, gazing round, beheld the pomp of spires
And palaces, to view like a magic brought:
All glittering in the sun-beam

(Source, Losty 1990, p. 8)

Atkinson goes on to compare the European part of the city with the native area of the town and the surrounding squalor, a contrast that became more pronounced as the nineteenth century progressed. There are passing mentions of the Great Houses; the 'exuberant neoclassical palaces' as Thomas Metcalf describes them in his book, *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj* (1989) and that he 'does not assess at all fully the Indian response to British building in Calcutta', and further that, 'such a study would require a volume of its own' (Metcalf 1989, p. xv11).

Some attempts have been made to fulfil this charge. Swati Chattopadhyay's book *Representing Calcutta, Modernity, Nationalism, and the Colonial Uncanny*, published in 2005, deconstructs the city of the nineteenth century on all levels, and looks at new ways of seeing past histories and includes information on the Great Houses. *The Indian Metropolis; A View Towards the West*, by Norma Evenson, published in 1989, includes the Marble Palace and the Palace of Raja Nabakrishna to explain how founders adopted western architecture and interior décor for their homes. Important as these studies are, the examination of the Great Houses is a by-product of other interests and not the central focus. On the other hand, the 2002 thesis written by M.

Battacharyya, *Locating Identities* concentrates on the residences of Kolkata's indigenous elites from the mid-eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century.

There are a few other works that refer directly to the Great Houses. Essays by scholars and amateur historians of Kolkata's history make up *Calcutta*: *The Living City, Volume 1: The Past*, edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri and published in 1990 to celebrate Kolkata's tri-centenary deals with the history, lifestyles and to a smaller extent the architecture of the Great Houses during colonial rule. Jon Lang et al.'s comprehensive all-India work, *Architecture and Independence; the Search for Identity – India 1880 – 1980*, published in 1997, makes a number of references to the Great Houses, the indigenous elites and their aspirations visible through their European-influenced architecture, using the Mullick family's 'Marble Palace' as the example.

This current study takes these initial observations much further. In the first place it provides an extensive visual record of the houses – something that the earlier studies largely lack.

The problem: the lack of visual representation of the Great Houses

As Kolkata's grand European buildings and streetscapes evolved into the 'City of Palaces', artists portrayed the British buildings of the city extensively. British authors recorded mainly their own architecture and very little of the indigenous area despite their size and splendour of the residences of the wealthy elite. This examination shows the necessity of sourcing artists' impressions, original photographs or copies and plans to construct a comprehensive study of the Great Houses.

When the English artists, Thomas Daniell and his nephew William arrived in India in 1786 they recorded the earliest of Kolkata's British colonial buildings in a series of twelve aquatints titled 'Views of Calcutta' (completed in 1788). One image included a view of some large Hindu houses on Chitpore Road (now Rabindra Sarani), north Kolkata (see Figure 1.4). It is apparent from Thomas Daniells' comments below that they felt they were not seeing the best of Indian architecture;

> In this view on Chitpore Road…appears the house of a native Bengal merchant; the style of architecture in its ornamental parts is Mahommedan, except in the turret, which is an unsuccessful attempt at the Grecian, as introduced by the

Portuguese. These incongruities very frequently occur in modern Indian buildings, whose owners have intercourse with Europeans. (Losty 1990, p. 63)

Thomas Daniell presumed that the home was influenced by the Portuguese because of the turrets, which can be seen clearly in Figure 1.4. Vasco da Gama had reached India in 1498 and these earliest of India's European colonists had been building in India since the mid sixteenth century. More importantly, 'A View on the Chitpore Road' shows that the house not only has Moghul and Hindu elements, typical of the era, but also shows the contrast between the impressive two level building style of the merchant's home and the small hutments of the poor of north Kolkata close by – a juxtaposition still common today.

Figure 1.4. Thomas and W. Daniell, 'View on the Chitpore Road', 1792. Coloured aquatint, from Oriental Scenery, second series engraved by Thomas and William Daniell, London, 1797-8; 42 x 60 cm. Source, Losty, 1990, Plate 9.

The Daniells' view of the 'native town' reveals the mix of temples, huts and brick mansions, however Fraser's later drawing of Chitpore Road gives a clearer understanding of the overcrowded area (see Figure 1.5). Writing on the Daniells' drawing William Hickey remarked that the temple was 'built by a native of great fortune, but never completed' adding that 'part of it had fallen'. This observation indicates a need to present the native town as a place of decrepitude in order to separate it from the orderliness of the European area and the suggestion of ruins to delineate the 'native area' (Chattopadhyay 2005, p. 57).

Figure 1.5. James Baillie Fraser, 'A View in the bazaar leading to the Chitpore Road', 1819. Coloured aquatint, engraved by F.C. Lewis, from Fraser's 'Views of Calcutta and its Environs', London, 28 x 42.5cm. Source, Losty, 1990, Plate 17.

Chattopadhyay suggests that the Daniells' landscape drawings worked as maps, by evoking knowledge and mastery of geographical space without acknowledging the difficulties in doing so (Chattopadhyay 2005, p. 37). The grand buildings of European Kolkata were blurred into being part of the landscape, with the Indian population in the foreground, as a tableau of Indian life (see Figure 1.6). Interestingly, the British residents were mainly excluded from these scenes; however, it is the inclusion of native workers in the Daniells' work, not the work itself, which makes the scenes important. Indian workers signified the long standing traditions of India, recorded with the city in the background, to create an image of the city as a material possession.

Figure 1.6. Sir Charles D'Oyley, 'Esplanade', c.1835. Coloured lithograph from his 'Views of Calcutta and its Environs'. Source, Losty, 1990, plate 30.

Thomas Daniells' 'Views of Calcutta' (see Figure 1.7) shows natives at work on the river in the foreground and the uncommon inclusion of some large residences of the indigenous elite in the background. Prints such as these became popular in the homes of not only the British in Kolkata but also the large homes of wealthy Indians.

Figure 1.7. Thomas Daniell, Views of Calcutta, 1788. Coloured etching with aquatint, 40.5x53 cm. Source, Losty, 1990, p. 48-49

Where the Daniells' portrayed landscapes, Flemish artist François Balthazar Solvyns was one of the few artists to portray Indians. Solvyns lived in Kolkata from 1791 to 1803 and produced a volume of etchings titled, *A Collection of Two Hundred and Fifty Coloured Etchings: Descriptive of the Manners, Customs and Dresses of the Hindoos* (see Figures 1.8 and 1.9). These works, with their visual representation, and accompanying text provide a valuable resource for an understanding of Indian society, among which depicted their crafts, religious festivals, transport and musical instruments. Solvyns sought to record the life of the native quarter of Kolkata. Yet despite this goal and the comprehensive nature of the collection there are just two etchings of Kolkata which show the northern precinct of the city, and the kind of houses the indigenous elites, built there. See Figure 1.10 for one of them.

Despite these visual limitations the immense differences between the European area of Kolkata and 'black town' are clear when examining these representations of colonial Kolkata. The European area was shown as light and airy, with well-built, gracious buildings, whereas 'black town' appears unimpressive and untidy. Even the opulent mansions of the wealthy Indians were considered unworthy of recording.
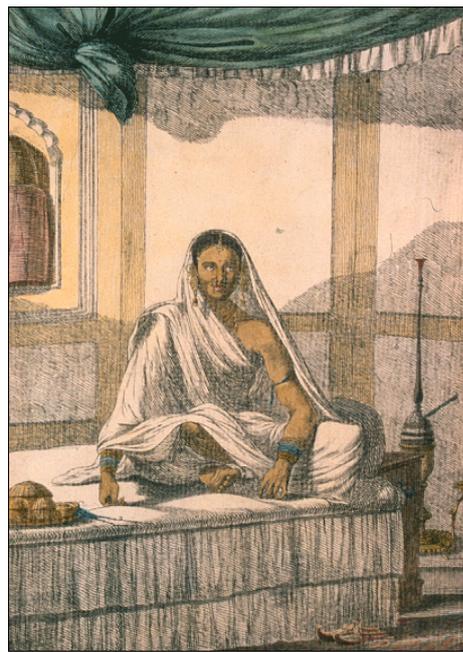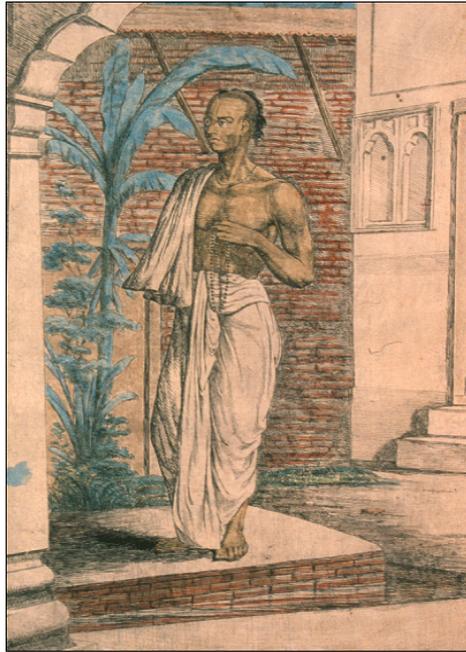
Figure 1.8. *Left,* Balthazar Solvyns, A Man of Distinction, Les Hindous. Figure 1.9. *Right*, Balthazar Solvyns, A Woman of Distinction, Les Hindous, Vol. 11 (1810). Source, R.L.Hardgrave Jr, 2006.

Figure 1.10. Balthazar Solvyns 'Hindoo Buildings', Les Hindous, vol. 11 (1810). Source, R.L.Hardgrave Jr, 2006.

The lack of visual representations of the Great Houses shows British prejudices, however, rather than inferior copies of British colonial architecture by a people fascinated by a foreign culture, the Great Houses are the creative responses of an intelligent, entrepreneurial group of Bengalis who partially assimilated with a colonial power.

The love-hate relationship between the British and the indigenous elites was complex, and both parties fluctuated in their feelings and perceptions, and their loyalty and trust of one another. These collective attitudes have, at different times, and from different perspectives, altered the way the Great Houses were seen by both British and Indians. The study recognises that the Great Houses of Kolkata are significantly more important than they have previously been perceived, and so are worth preserving.

Heritage and conservation

Up to date there has been no major restoration of these heritage residential buildings by either government or non-government organisations. The main reason for this seeming neglect is because most of the buildings are privately owned, and the government in the city proper, the Kolkata Municipal Corporation [K.M.C.], deems that restoration and maintenance is for the most part the responsibility of the owners. Further, despite the inclusion of many Great Houses on heritage lists there is no funding for heritage residential buildings without making applications to the K.M.C., which is a lengthy and difficult process. Over eight hundred heritage buildings in Kolkata have been listed by the K.M.C. They include buildings and monuments of historical, architectural and socio-cultural significance. The K.M.C. has compiled a 'first list' of buildings of 'exceptional importance' (see Chapter Three), and many are the palaces and mansions of the Great Families.

The neglect of heritage residential buildings can be seen throughout north Kolkata, exemplified in Figure 1.11, the ruined house of Firingi Kamal Bose in Jorosanko[3]. This neglect is despite an increase in heritage awareness both locally and internationally. The interest emerged in Kolkata during the 1980's and 1990's, particularly after the city's tercentenary, and the 50th year of Independence. Among the many publications, the two volumes, *Calcutta: The Living City, Vol.1* and *Calcutta: The Living City, Vol. 2:* edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri and published in 1990 were the most significant. This burgeoning awareness led to a number of conservation projects by heritage groups, and the restoration of some public buildings.

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[3] The house on Nimtola Ghat Street has also functioned as the Free Church Institution, known also as the Duff College (from 1843). Today part of the building houses the Jorosanko Police Station.

Figure 1.11. The house of Firingi Kamal Bose (1830) in 2005.

One recent project is the restoration of the Metropolitan Building, a Kolkata landmark on Chowringhee Road, now Jawaharlal Nehru Street, by the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (Intach)[4]. However, as Kolkata's local government, the K.M.C. expects home owners to maintain their private heritage homes without public funding, so it seems certain that these enormous heritage mansions and palaces, included in this study, will continue to decline.

The remaining Great Houses of the city's indigenous elites are certainly at risk. Scholarly neglect on the part of both Indian and Western historians shows the gap this study will fill. The recent restoration of British colonial architecture shows that after almost sixty years of Independence, Kolkata has begun to see its colonial past in new

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[4] The Indian National Trust for Art and Culture (Intach) is an autonomous non-governmental organisation set up in 1984 for conservation of India's natural and man made environment. Intach aims to create awareness among the public for the preservation of heritage. The Architectural Heritage Division provides expertise in architectural and structural conservation of built heritage, the conservation and development of historic cities, restoration and re-use of historic buildings and development of Museums.

ways. This change can be seen in the response to the author's previous work on the Great Houses.

An unexpected response

A light hearted book, *The Forgotten Palaces of Calcutta*, on the subject of the Great Houses by the author and published in 2006, has made it possible to assess an initial Indian response to the way this thesis has been constructed. The comments by print and media journalists in Kolkata in May and June of 2006, such as *The Statesman*, *The Telegraph* and *The Hindustan Times*, and government officials such as the Mayor of Kolkata and the Heritage Governor of Bengal on May and June of 2006, show a level of surprise and some discomfort at the extent of deterioration evident in the Great Houses exemplified in the publication. For instance, in his speech in Kolkata, Mayor Bikash Ranjan Bhattacharyya declared the publication would be used 'as a weapon' to draw attention to the condition of the houses and promised that billboards on heritage buildings would be outlawed.

Similarly, the editor of Niyogi publications called the publication a 'clarion call' for something to be done sooner rather than later. The Chairman of the Heritage Commission of West Bengal also spoke of the timely reminder and that heritage and conservation are important areas of concern. Indian heritage architects and historians, including Debashish Nayak, Arkhil Sarcar and Professor Barun De, were grateful for an objective view on the matter, something perhaps only an outsider could give. To a younger generation of Kolkattans, the publication drew attention to buildings and histories of which they were unaware. This information was gathered from meetings with young journalists and some letters from readers of the publication. Alternately, from a very small number of critics there was a certain reluctance to embrace ideas of conservation and heritage as they are considered luxuries for wealthy countries only (interview, All India Radio, May, 2006). To understand their importance one has to understand the history of Kolkata and its development.

2

THE CITY OF KOLKATA

'…the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were the setting for the first sustained encounter between Asian intellectuals and the west. An Indian intelligentsia living in Calcutta responded in a most creative way to the aspects of European culture that became available to them' (Marshall 2000, p. 307).

The area of north Kolkata, where the study is primarily focussed, exists much as it did in colonial times. In many ways, Kolkata has retained its own unique identity and character, making it not only an interesting city but a fine model on which to base a study on India's merchant class and their architectural response to colonial rule. Compared to the city centre and southern areas, north Kolkata has not been subjected to gentrification or westernisation. A study of early maps show that the original street patterns of Kolkata largely survived from its development until the end of the nineteenth century (Losty 1990, p. 22), the main period of concern here. Indeed they have largely survived to this day.

Despite its reputation today as India's most maligned and overlooked city, in colonial times Kolkata was the capital of the Presidency of Bengal, and the seat of the Viceroy of India until 1911 and the most important component of the British Empire in India. Much of the urban history of Kolkata is an imperial history, visible in the city's architecture, and a legacy of centuries of British colonial rule. It was here that the roles of coloniser and subject were played out from 1690 to 1911. When Delhi became India's new capital, Kolkata lost its primacy. In addition, Independence and Partition and the loss of its hinterland meant that Kolkata further lost its mercantile role in Eastern India. As a result much has stagnated and many buildings of interest have decayed, the Great Houses amongst them.

Kolkata's climate has been an important component in the process of physical decay experienced by the Great Houses. As a typical riverine city and part of the Great

Gangetic Delta, Kolkata is a hot, tropical, humid city. Kolkata's wet monsoon season produces periodic flooding, and in colonial times much of the town would remain under water for up to a week, which led to the formation of mould and decay, and the eventual destruction of the surface of buildings.

In 1824 Bishop Heber of Kolkata wrote of the city as surrounded by marshes, mangrove swamps and tidal creeks that; 'so many agents of destruction were at work in Calcutta that no architecture could ever be durable', adding that 'although old ruins could be found, it would be difficult to find a single edifice over 150 years old' (Evenson 1989, p. 51).

Of the British founded cities, Kolkata, along with Mumbai, was the business heart of the country. With the loss of their business partners after 1911 and again after 1947, Kolkata's business organisations suffered a blow and quickly Bengal became a marginalised state, heralding the decline that has been continuing to this day. The changes in business structures were one of many blows to the indigenous elite's position in society.

This decline has been compounded by the political situation in the state since Independence. Politically, West Bengal boasts the longest democratically elected communist government (beginning in 1977) in the world. Taking into consideration that the residential mansions and palaces of this study were the result of a collision of cultures between the British and the city's indigenous elites, in post colonial and independent times these facts lead to questions about the relevance of the former indigenous elite's mansions on the twenty first century map of Kolkata. The aim of this study of the Great Houses is to draw attention to their current status and their heritage importance. To understand how the Great Families came to be such requires a basic understanding of the mercantile development of Kolkata.

With the inclusion of maps and images, this chapter briefly outlines the history of Kolkata during colonial times, including the development of 'native' and 'European' towns, to form a basis for understanding the architecture and design of the Great Houses and the aspirations that inspired them.

History and the colonial city

This study accepts Chattopadhyay's observation in her book, *Representing Calcutta, Modernity, nationalism, and the colonial uncanny*, that the written history of Kolkata is an imperial history, and Kolkata's historians, in relying on, and uncritically accepting European sources, have re-circulated past views of Kolkata's urban history. Despite the outcome of this orientalist view little has changed in writing about the city. Instead of critiques and analysis, Kolkata's history is of a British heroism in forging a city out of the marshy jungles of Bengal. This opinion is also held by many Kolkattans today: that from the moment Job Charnock came ashore, Kolkata's history began, without any serious acknowledgment of indigenous settlement prior to the arrival of the British.

It should be noted that in 2003, Subhrangshu Gupta of the Kolkata Tribune stated that Job Charnock would no longer be named as the founder of Kolkata as 'the city had neither a founder nor a foundation day'[5] (*The Tribune* 17 May, 2003) . In addition, a high court ruling stated that August 24, 1690, Kolkata's foundation day, 'would no longer be observed as Kolkata existed before the arrival of Job Charnock, citing the name of Kalikata having been mentioned in the "Monasavijay Kabya" much before Job Charnock's arrival and the land document of "Aain-e-Akbari" in 1596. The Sabarno Roy Chowdhury family received the *zamindari*[6] of Sutani, Govindapur and Kalikata in 1608. The High Court gave this judgment after a public interest petition filed by the Saborno Roy Chowdhuryr Parivar Parishad and nine other persons challenged the naming of Job Charnock as the founder of the city, and August 24, 1690, as its foundation day. In time, the "mistake" in history books, other texts and reference books will be changed. Documents stating that Job Charnock landed in Sutani village on August 24, 1690, and the British received the tenancy right of Kalikata, Sutani and Govindapur on November 10, 1698' ('Job Charnock not Kolkata Founder', *The Tribune*. Chandigarh, 17 May, 2003).

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[5] Gupta, S. 'Job Charnock not Kolkata Founder,'*Kolkata Tribune* 17th May 2003
[6] A landholder who controlled land and was responsible for payment of the assessed revenue to the government; under the British a landowner (Metcalf 1997, p 423)

Before the arrival of the British East India Company in Bengal, the area we now know as Kolkata was indeed no single city but a group of three quiet riverine villages surrounded by jungle; Sutanati[7], Kalikata, and Govindapore[8], running from north to south, three miles long by approximately one quarter mile wide (Losty 1990, p. 22). In 1690 British East India Company agent Job Charnock chose a site approximately ninety six miles from the Bay of Bengal for his company's first trading post. In Bengal this marked the furthest point inland that, at that time, was accessible by ocean going ships. The area now known as Kolkata was already a site for international trade with the presence of Portuguese, Armenian, Muslim and Hindu traders (Losty 1990, p. 22). The British were just one of several foreign merchants given the right to trade. Bangla, at that time was a prosperous region ruled from Murshidabad in the north. Dacca (now Dhaka) in what is now Bangladesh, was also a centre of Moghul royalty and the areas of Burdwan, Krishanagar and Rajshashi were dominated by powerful *zamindars* (Chattopadhyay 2005, p. 8).

The three villages were close enough to each other to be sold as group, when Job Charnock's successor and son in law, Charles Eyre in 1699, spent one thousand rupees to acquire the land rights for the three villages from the Seths, a *zamindari* family, and the rent collectors for lower Bangla. *Zamindars* were hereditary tax collectors or land owners with full proprietary rights to local taxes. The British used the term to mean landowners. With this purchase, the East India Company subsequently became *zamindars*, who could begin trading legitimately and in earnest (Losty 1990, p. 17).

First the British East India Company established their position by building a factory[9] complex they called, somewhat grandly, Fort William. In 1702 the British flag was raised above the fort for the first time though at that time, it was no more than a compound of factories, warehouses and residences, situated approximately where the General Post Office is today. Like the British trading-posts in India's other port cities, Mumbai and Chennai, the British were afraid of being attacked from the water than from the interior, therefore their defences were low.

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[7] Sutanati is also spelt Suttanuttee
[8] Govindapore is also spelt Gobindapore
[9] In the colonial context, a factory was a place abroad where agents did business: where business was carried out by commercial agents, or factors, especially a trading station.

The British traders requested an area of hinterland as a buffer around their settlement, their base for trade, and the nawabs of Bengal hoped for some kind of profit from allowing foreigners on their soil. It was not exactly an invasion as much as a mutually profitable arrangement. There were however, confrontations between the European traders and the indigenous population but the sheer numbers of British and the growing profits were too persuasive for both sides, leading them inevitably onward together. In 1716 the British received their land grant of another thirty eight villages, increasing Kolkata's territory to about three miles along the river and one mile inland (Evenson 1989, p. 15). The heart of the settlement, the Town and Bazaar, huddled around the 'fort'. Indian traders, mainly Hindu Bengalis such as the Seths, Basaks and Mullicks, developed and traded in cotton; worked as simple fishermen or were traders and merchants (Losty 1990, p. 11). Because these families prospered, these same names still occupy an important place in the history and development of Kolkata.

The northernmost village was Sutanati, or 'thread market;' the village of weavers, and Burrabazar formed the centre of the market town. From early references it was populous as early as 1706 (Sinha 1967, p. 386) and made rapid progress as the eighteenth century progressed. Early plans show Sutanati as having abundant gardens and trees. This pattern seems to have been developed by the Seths, who established a 'great garden', Zura Bari Bag, on Chitpore Road, the eastward limit of the town and a quarter of a mile from the river (see Figure 1.11). The Seths received a discount on their land rent in return for keeping Chitpore Road leading to the north in good repair (Losty 1990, p. 23).

The British were secure in their role as traders. Consequently Fort William had little in the way of defences and this oversight was highlighted when the ruler, Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula, based in Murshidabad, became concerned when he heard the British traders had built a fort. Conflict became almost inevitable when the young nawab protested against the unlawful activities of the East India Company in Bengal: the unauthorized fortifications of Fort William, illegal private trade by the company servants, and illegal shelter given to the nawab's disloyal subjects. The nawab asked the British to address his complaints sending several diplomatic missions to Kolkata for an amicable settlement of the dispute. When the British insulted the nawab

through his special envoy, he was enraged, and immediately ordered his forces to march on Kolkata to storm Fort William and capture.
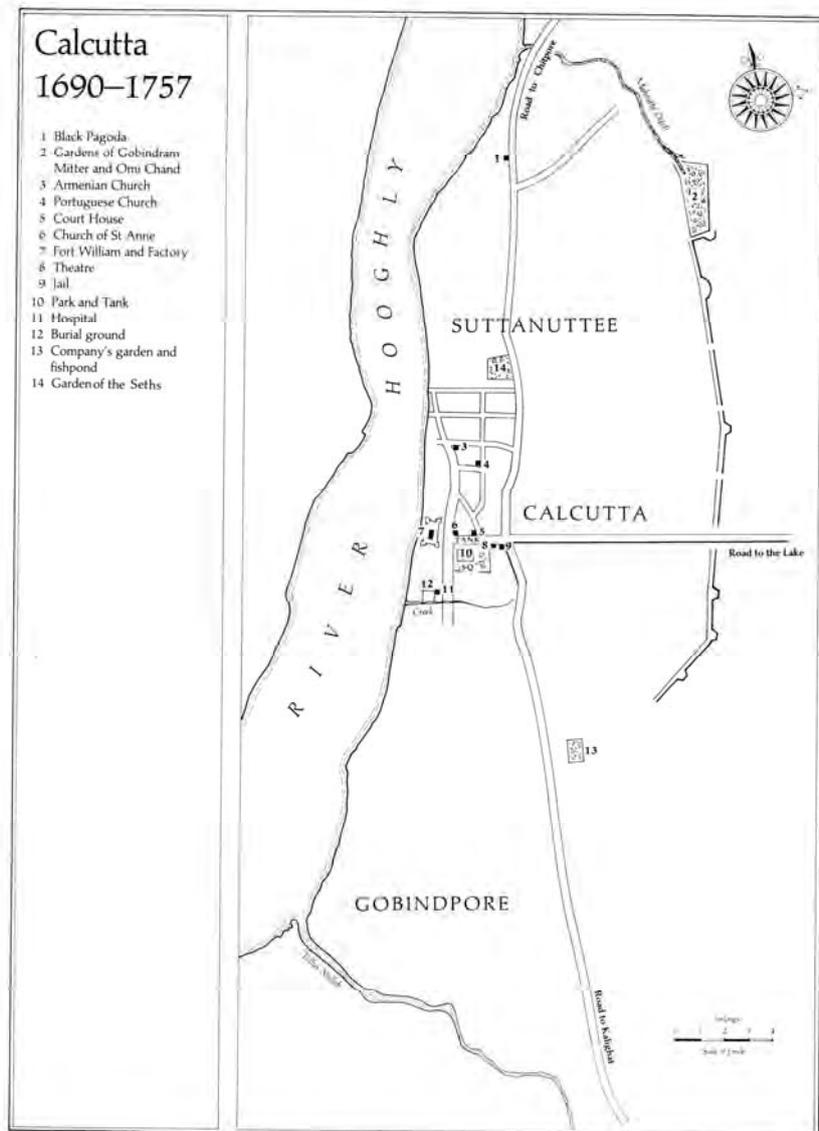
Figure 2.1. Map of Kolkata 1690-1757. Source, Losty, 1990, p. 22.

The subsequent fighting destroyed not only the Fort but also the Governor's House and St Anne's Church (Losty 1990, p. 32). It was during this attack that the nawab ordered his men to incarcerate a number of British soldiers and civilians, including women, in a small cell called the 'black hole' overnight. The over-crowding, high temperature and lack of water led to almost all perishing.[10] Despite dispute over the

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[10] According to tradition, the nawab confined 146 British prisoners on the night of 20th June 1756 in a small room of which only 23 survived. Later research reduced the number of deaths to 43, indicating neglect rather than intent.

details of what really happened on that night in June, 1756, Kolkata has been burdened with the tragedy of this unfortunate incident ever since, and the notorious 'Black Hole' has become almost synonymous with the city itself.

The Battle of Plassey – the turning point

Devastated by their defeat at the hands of the nawab, the Bengal Army of the East India Company could either surrender or apply force to avenge the defeat. After appealing for reinforcements from Madras, Robert Clive (1725-74) and Admiral Watson arrived in Kolkata and led the retaliation later the same year, defeating the Nawab at Plassey on 23 June 1757. The Battle of Plassey, (or Palashi) lasted for about eight hours and the nawab was defeated because of the treachery of his leading general, Mir Jafir. It is best described as a skirmish but the political consequences were so far-reaching and devastating that it has been magnified into a battle. The conflict at Plassey laid the foundation for British rule in Bengal and the base from which the British expanded their territorial domain and subsequently built an empire which gradually colonised most of India and ultimately other parts of Asia as well (Sinha 1967, p. 128).

The city of Kolkata began to expand dramatically due to the British victory, and an atmosphere of great confidence was enjoyed by the British, setting off an extended building boom in Kolkata, with both British and Indian capital being invested in bricks and mortar (Marshall 2000, p. 314). This rebuilding and burst of growth after Plassey has been described as the beginning of modern Kolkata. The building of a new Fort William had begun, with more fortifications and offices. The Maidan had been cleared of jungle and the tigers Warren Hastings enjoyed hunting. Banks and hotels began to line Chowringhee Road, and Dalhousie Square, (renamed in 1969 as B.B.D. Bagh, Benoy Badel Dinish Bagh, after the three revolutionaries) became the official-business-residential headquarters of the British and the residential locality and home to Britain's colonial families.

After the Battle of Plassey, the British traders realised they needed the knowledge and support of local rulers to oversee their administration. They looked to Bengal's indigenous leaders, many of them *zamindars*, to help administer the new colonial regime and maintain a peaceful rural Bengal. These events also affected the leading

indigenous mercantile class who seized the opportunities opened to them and quickly began to make their fortunes. These men became indispensable to the British rulers, particularly in gathering knowledge on how revenue was assessed and collected. The British had begun to investigate this aspect of Bengali society and commerce as early as the 1770's, and this focus on revenue assessing and collecting continued to be the most widespread and continuous activity of the British during their rule. Later it became termed by the British as the 'land-settlement process' (Spear 1990, p. 96).

The development of a divided Kolkata

With the building of a new Fort William and the subsequent move of the indigenous merchants, traders and agents to the area of Sutanati, Kolkata became divided into twin towns. This informal segregation of the colonial city was directly instigated by the British. Gradually, like many colonial cities, these areas became known as 'European Town' and 'native town', or 'black town' and 'white town'. This development began with the building of a new, more secure Fort William. Subsequent alterations in the town planning of Kolkata were necessary to obtain space for the large fort. Indian dwellings were cleared away from the river bank to make space for viewing or firing if necessary and large inland areas were also cleared (Nilsson, 1968 p. 65) This large-scale clearing of the area marked the beginning of the Maidan, the large open parkland in the centre of Kolkata today (Losty 1990 p. 32). As more British arrived at Fort William the Indian population who had built houses near the Fort were forced out. By 1757, the year that marks a period of consolidation for the East India Company which had begun to function more as a colonial government and less as a trading concern, all Indians evicted from the Fort William area, were moved north of the city to the area of Sutanati, now simply north Kolkata. Offers of compensation in the form of grants of land or gifts of housing were given to the most loyal. In other cases, land in the area of the fort was traded for land in the village of Sutanati.

Contrasts in urban density were the most distinctive feature of Kolkata's two 'towns'. The sparsely distributed buildings of 'white town' were in stark contrast with the dense fabric of 'black town' (see Figures 2.2, 2.3). (It should be noted that the author uses period images for their informational value rather than their accuracy, and is

aware that colonial viewpoints and assumptions about the Indian and British areas of Kolkata can be ambiguous).

Figure 2.2.*Left*, Sir Charles D'Oyley, *Esplanade*, c. 1835. Coloured lithograph from his Views of Calcutta and its Environs, Source, Losty, 1990, plate 30. Figure 2.3. *Right*, William Simpson, *View of Chitpore Road*, 1867. Source, 'Calcutta Heritage' 1990, p. 86.

Kolkata's settlement pattern rapidly produced a separation of other communities as well; each attracted to the commercial prospects of the growing city. As the Indian district developed in the north and the Europeans in the south, the area in between was inhabited by a mixture of people including Anglo-Indians, Portuguese, Jews, Greeks and wealthy Armenians who built mansions (now divided into flats), along Park Street (see Figure 2.4). There was also some racial intermixing in the area north of Tank Square (Dalhousie), in Lall Bazar, Bow Bazar and Dharamtollah, described by P. Sinha as the 'intermediate town' (Marshall 2000, p.317) where European businesses had grown up. It was an area inhabited by poor whites, Indian Christians and people of mixed race.

The area of Sutanati, the site of the Great Houses, was itself divided into a number of small districts, *tolas* or *tulis*, each with its own special character and communities and named after the caste or profession of the inhabitants. For example, Coolootola is the area named for Kalus or oil pressers, Kumartuli for the kumars, or potters, Jeliatola for Jelias, or fishermen, Domtooly for the Doms or scavengers, Goalatolly for the Goalas, the palanquin bearers, and milkmen, and Patuaola for the Patuas, or painters (N.K. Sinha 1967, p. 386).

These castes built up their trades in the populous area of north Kolkata and were indispensable to the indigenous elite and the day-to-day running of a Great House.

Many of the names of the *tulis* and the original livelihoods are still intact today, in particular the area of Kumartuli which is famous for its community of potters who work with traditional, age old techniques, particularly at the time of the Durga Puja[11] festival in October, when the area becomes lined with hundreds of life-sized clay figures of the goddess Durga, fashioned from mud taken from the river bed of the Hooghley River (see Figures 2.5, 2.6).
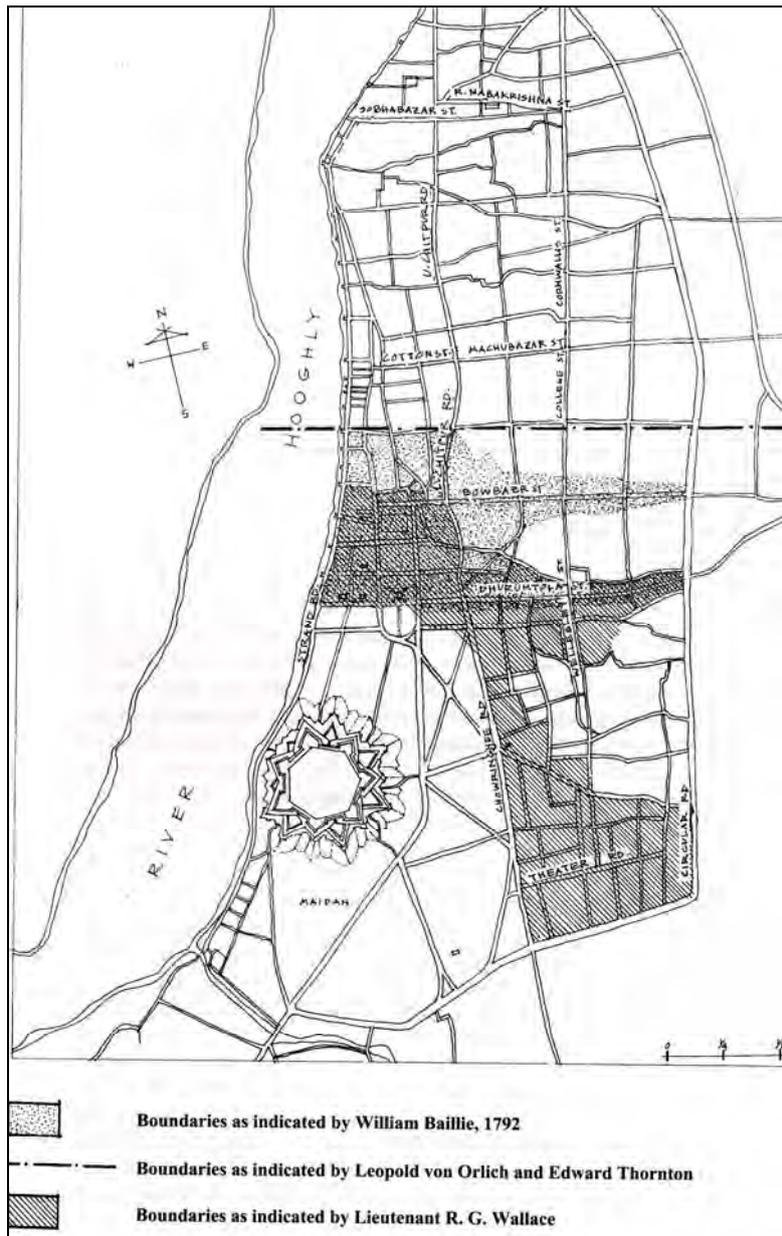
Figure 2.4. Map of Kolkata showing approximate boundaries of 'native town' to the north, 'European town' to the south and 'intermediate town' in 1792. Source, Chattopadhyay 2006, p. 78

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[11] *Durga Puja* is held over the four most auspicious days of the Hindu year, between mid-September to mid-October.

Figure 2.5. Left, an artisan of Kurmatuli, in 2004. Figure 2.6. A potter of Kurmatuli in 2004.

Today, categories like 'white town' and 'black town' can be seen as openly racist, but the distribution of these groups leads to a clearer indication of how the complex process of cross cultural contact and the Indian response to western ideas of architecture and lifestyle came about. Sinha describes the 'native' and the English towns of Kolkata up to the late eighteenth century as being 'two separate entities which met only on the lines of business' (Sinha 1967, p. 385). Later studies by Marshall, 2000, and Chattopadhyay, 2006, argue that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were the setting for sustained close encounters between educated Indian elites and European culture. Rather than the two areas working independently of one another they overlapped socially, economically and politically in varying degrees, at different levels and at different times. Relationships developed in the 'blurred boundaries' between the two and overlapping notions of space were re-negotiated constantly (Marshall 2000 p. 318, Chattopadhyay 2006, p. 157).

Evenson confirms this, 'despite the evidence for a segregated Kolkata, the social divisions of the city were not altogether rigid, but subject to modifications as the city developed' (Evenson 1989, p. 18). The imaginary boundaries of Kolkata's 'black' and 'white' towns were freely crossed by both the British and the Indians however, fewer

Europeans were willing or adventurous enough to venture deep into the indigenous area.

Indian residents evicted from their homes around the original fort included families with famous names such as the Tagores, the Ghosals of Bhukailash and the Debs of Shovabazar. Now owning vast parcels of land in Sutanati, families such as these gathered their extended families, servants and other dependents around them and built the first of Kolkata's Great Houses. In just two generations the families grew from being successful traders to wealthy landowners and in almost all cases it was their extensive land holdings in the city and the rural areas that helped them build their extravagant mansions and palaces. Soon these families became known as the Great Families of Kolkata.

North Kolkata

This dense area begins just north of Burrabazar, where the majority of Bengali merchants lived, and continues further north all the way to the former aristocratic area of Bagbazar and the Bagbazar Canal. Kolkata's Great Houses are concentrated in north Kolkata, [12]the oldest area of the city, and their close proximity to each other was a factor in the keen rivalry and competition between their wealthy founders (see Figure 2.7). As in colonial times, north Kolkata is still the most densely populated area of Kolkata (see Figure 2.8). Today most of the area is composed of busy, potholed roads, tiny lanes, squalid bustees, dwellings of the poor, and here and there, the extravagant mansions of the city's former elites. As grand as the British residences were in European Kolkata, these buildings, all owned and occupied by the 'native nobility' were equally palatial (see Figures 2.9, 2.10). Regardless of their opulence the Great Houses were held in disregard. William Hickey, commenting in 1789 on one of Thomas Daniells' best works in his series of twelve on Kolkata commented; 'Description of this view must be short as it represents a part of the town entirely inhabited by natives…' (Losty 1990. p. 48). Today, this crowded area seems an unlikely location for these grand mansions that still bear the mark of their former glory. Today, many are barely visible behind the build up of shops and billboards, victims of unplanned growth and urban decay.

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[12] North Kolkata is the traditional home of the Great Families, though there are a large number of grand mansions in other areas of Kolkata, two of which are included in the study.
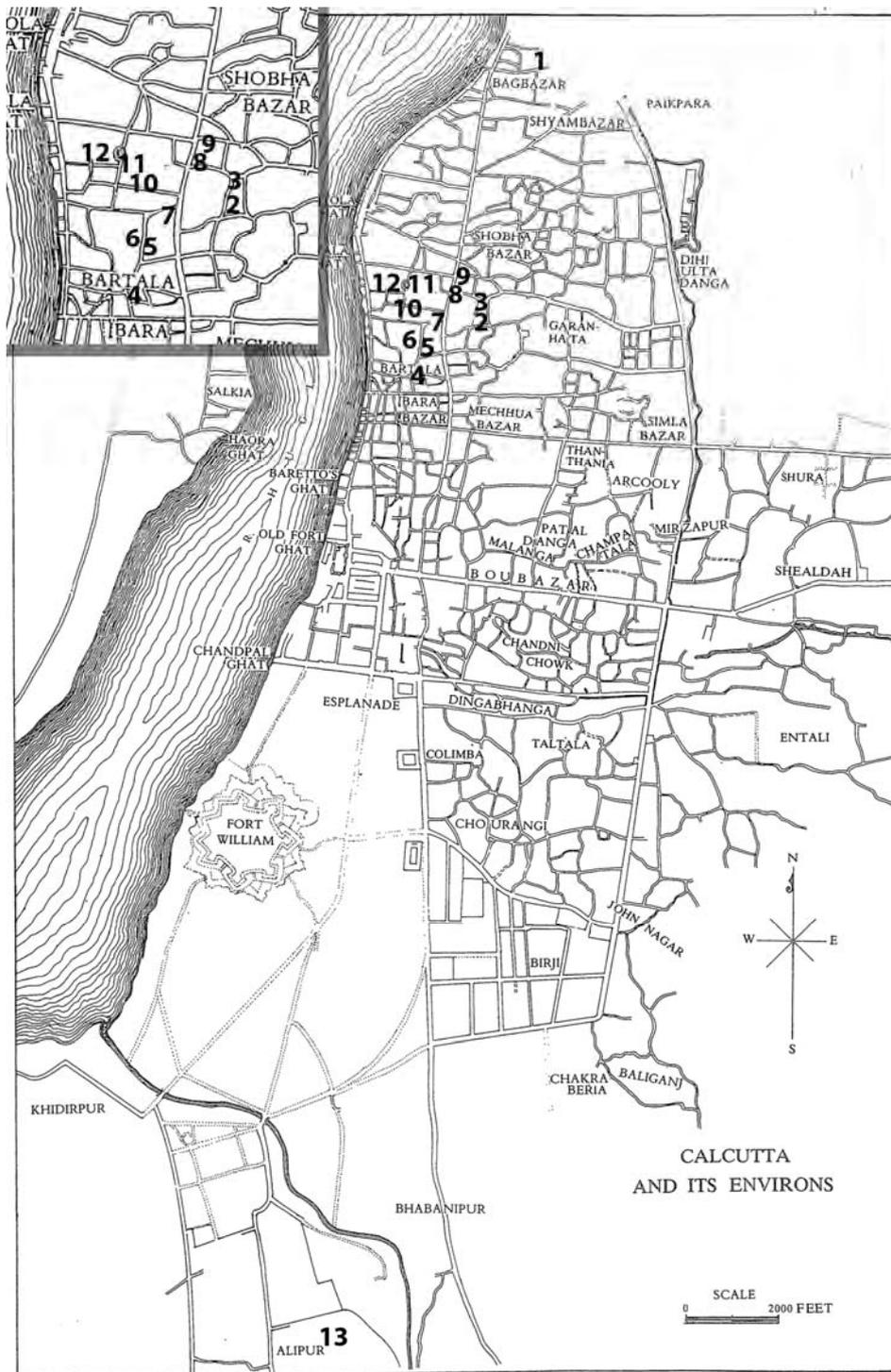
Figure 2.7. Map of Kolkata with additions by the author showing approximate locations of the Great Houses used in the study. Source, original map, Calcutta: The Living City, vol.1, 1990, p. 22.

Key

1.The Basu Bari 2. Home of the Laha family 3. House of Raja Kristo Dass Laha 4. Home of the Roy family of Batala 5. The Jorosanko Bati of the Roy family 6. The Mullick Garhiwallah 7. The Marble Palace 8. Palace of Raja Nabakrishna 9. Shovabazar Rajbari 10. House of the Tagore 11. The Prasad of Jotindra Mohan Tagore 12. Belgachia Villa 13. The Burdwan Palace

European suburb of Calcutta
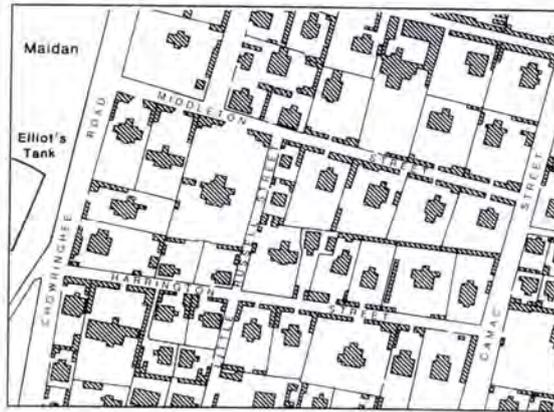
Indian suburb of Calcutta
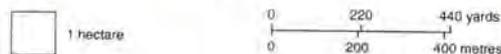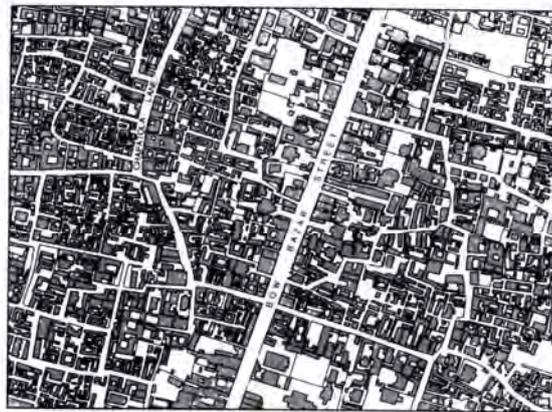
Figure 2.8. Contrasting morphologies (to the same scale). Source, Drakakis-Smith, 2000, p. 40.

Even in colonial times, this contrast of rich and poor and unfamiliar spatial qualities in north Kolkata made it difficult for British visitors to read the effect of the conspicuous wealth of Indians on the geography of the native town. Vast fortunes existed next to squalor, with no seeming desire to spatially differentiate between the two. Europeans with ideas of an exotic oriental city were invariably disappointed in Kolkata (Chattopadhyay 2006, p. 67).

Images of eighteenth and nineteenth century Kolkata are valuable in understanding the way the colonial city looked and functioned. Comparisons between these images and the contemporary photographs used in the study show the extent of the problems involved in conservation.
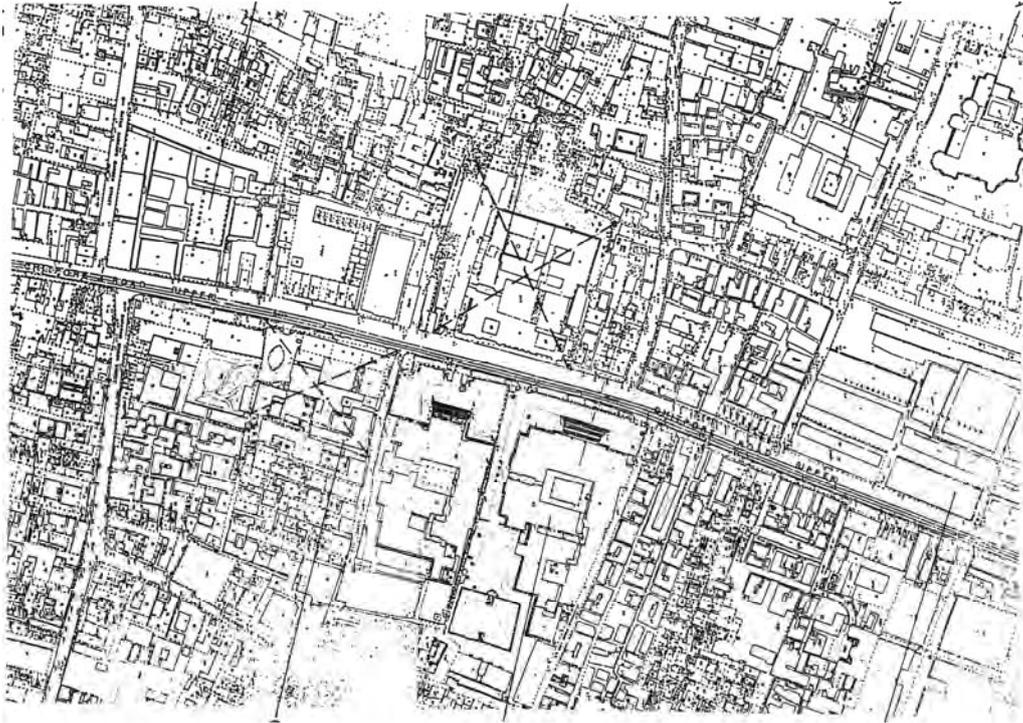
Figure 2.9. R.B. Smart's 'Survey of Calcutta, 1887-1990' showing an area on Chitpore Road. Source, Kolkata Municipal Corporation, 2006.
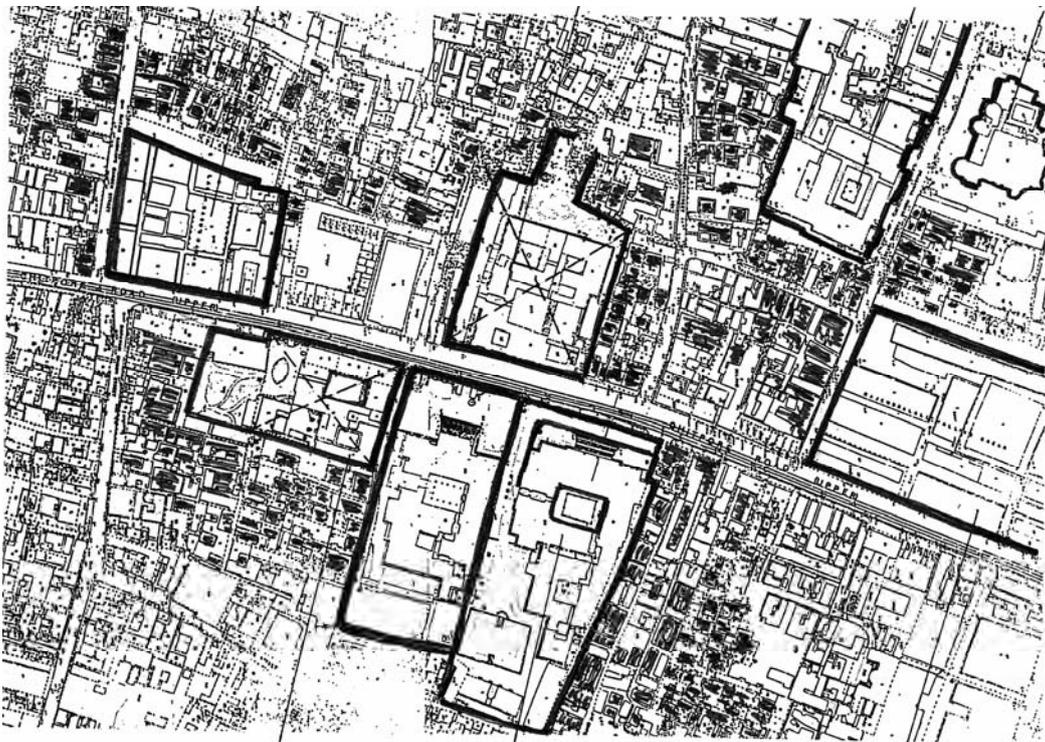
Figure 2.10. Smart's plan as in figure 2.9 with the addition of highlighted approximate boundaries of several Great Houses.

North Kolkata maps and visual and literary representations

Despite the magnificence of the residences being built in north Kolkata by the city's most prominent indigenous citizens, Kolkata's maps of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century show little detail of the 'native' area, or the Great Houses. This exclusion emphasises the limited regard shown to them both socially and politically in the minds of the British. The exception is the palace of Raja Nabakrishna Deb of Shovabazar[13], which appeared on every map of that time (e.g. Figure 2.11) indicating his social and political importance to the British (Chattapadhyay 2005, p. 151). Like many other Indian residents, Raja Nabakrishna Deb moved from Govindapur to Sutanati after his home was appropriated by the East India Company which then helped him acquire vast land holdings in repayment for his great loyalty during the Battle of Plassey (Sinha 1967, p. 163).

Sprawling mansions and palaces like Nabakrishna's made the area of Sutanati the centre of social activity for Kolkata's indigenous elites. When Nabakrishna began the fashion of inviting Europeans for special occasions, such as Durga Puja, these families also came to represent 'native' opinion to the British. In their large self contained mansions the Great Families were generous hosts and could behave as royalty, thus gaining advantages, both commercial and political, that would otherwise have been denied to them (Chattopadhyay 2005, p. 139).

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[13] The name Raja Nabakrishna was spelt in a variety of ways by the British, as demonstrated in the map reference in figure 20.

1 Black Pagoda
2 House of Rajah Rajkissen
3 New Mint
4 Armenian Church
5 Cathedral of the Virgin Mary of the Rosary
6 Hindoo College
7 Custom House Wharf
8 Old Fort/Customs House
9 Writers' Buildings
10 St Andrew's Church
11 John Palmer's house
12 Magistrates' Court
13 Taylor & Co. Auctioneers
14 Mission Church
15 Portuguese Church of Our Lady of Doris
16 Marquess of Hastings statue
17 Tulloh & Co
18 Old Mint
19 Garstin's Buildings
20 Exchange/College of Fort William
21 St John's Cathedral
22 Spence's Hotel
23 Wilson's Hotel
24 Colvin & Co
25 Bank of Bengal
26 Supreme Court
27 Town Hall
28 Treasury
29 Government House
30 Bengal Club 1827-30
31 Ghulam Mahomed's Mosque
32 Oil Bazaar
33 Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart
34 Steam Engine
35 Eden Gardens and Respondentia Walk
36 Calcutta Cricket Club Ground
37 Ochterlony monument
38 Sudder Diwani Adawlat and Sieve Tank
39 St Thomas' Church
40 Free Presbyterian Church
41 Madrassah
42 Asiatic Society's Building
43 Macaulay's house and Bengal Club
44 St Peter's Church
45 Fort William Government House
46 Old Bishop's Palace
47 St Thomas' R.C. Church
48 Sans Souci Theatre
49 Mr Graham's house
50 Chowringhee Theatre
51 St Paul's Cathedral
52 Bishop's Palace
53 Jail
54 General Hospital
55 Native Courts/Military Hospital
56 Upper Military Orphanage
57 St Stephen's Kidderpore

Figure .2.11. Map of Kolkata, 1798-1858. Source, Losty, 1990, p.72. (Note that the spelling of Nabakrishna is 'Rajkissen' on the above map. This is a simplification of the Bengali name used by the British at the time).

These impressive residences were not simply homes and extravagant showpieces, but spaces of power in which their owners aspired to engage with their rulers at least on an equal footing. Their wealth and their close association with the rulers of the day were conspicuously displayed by imitating the neo classical British buildings that mushroomed in the centre and south of the city.

The 'native town' lacked the order of 'white town' and unlike the buildings portrayed there the artists did not note or specify the buildings they were portraying in 'native town'. The street scenes of north Kolkata depicted by artists such as the Daniells', Fraser, D'Oyley, Solvyns and Hickey show buildings affected by bad maintenance and surrounding. Balthazar Solvyns in his notes wrote of the 'black town' of Kolkata in colonial times; 'No European is to be seen there, and the construction of the houses is entirely different from ours…' and further, his notes on his illustration titled 'Hindoo Building'; 'It is taken from the road leading to Chitpore, a place almost exclusively peopled by the natives of the country' (Hardgrave Jnr 2006, p .5).

Paintings of 'white' town by colonial artists provide evidence that the area was populated by both Europeans and Indians. Indeed, Marshall writes that 'the Indian presence in 'white town' must have been overwhelming' (Marshall 2000, p. 317). The limited images of 'black town' however, rarely include Europeans. Hickey's annotation to his view of 'native town' states; 'description of this view must be short as it represents a part of the town entirely inhabited by natives'. With this statement he summed up the reasons why so many artists paid so little attention to the portrayal of the native town; in their opinion there was nothing worth considering (Chattopadhyay 2006, p. 59). They were certainly not anthropologists.

In 'white town' in the eighteenth century impressive and elegant neo classical buildings and a small number of Gothic styled buildings had began to rise there and consequently European writers described the area as 'elegant and prosperous'(see Figures 2.12 2.13) (S.N.Mukherjee 1987, p. 12). European literature is pervaded by the image of life in Kolkata as a series of endless parties and gaiety.

In stark contrast, European writers recorded their impressions of 'native town' in the eighteenth century, 'with its black, ill-lighted, narrow, slimy lanes, its atrocious ponds, its gaping ditches, its miserable bypaths on which every abomination under the sun is committed, and its sloughs of despond after each passing shower of rain' (see Figure 2.14), (Seabrook 1996, p. 2). S.N.Mukherjee describes the area as a series of, 'narrow, dingy lanes, bazaars, huts, hovels and filth' and the Great Houses as 'some odd palaces in some unexpected by-lanes' (S.N.Mukherjee 1987, p. 12). After seeing the Chowringhee area a British visitor declared that the "black town is as complete a contrast to this as can well be conceived. Its streets are narrow and dirty; the houses,

of two stories, occasionally brick, but generally mud, and thatched, perfectly resembling the cabins of the poorest class in Ireland" (Evenson 1989, p. 20).

Figure 2.12. *Left,* Sir Charles D'Oyley, *Chowringhee Road from No. X1 Esplanade*, c. 1835. Coloured lithograph from his Views of Calcutta and its Environs,1848. Source, Losty, 1990, plate 31. Figure 2.13. *Right*, D'Oyley, *View of Calcutta* c.1835.

Figure 2.14. Sir Charles D'Oyly, 'View in Clive Street', c.1835. Coloured lithograph. Source, Losty, 1990, p.114.

Behind the image of Kolkata as a 'city of palaces' was a different reality as discovered by Bishop Heber in 1823; 'These are the front lines; behind them ranges the native town, deep, black and dingy, with narrow crooked streets, huts of earth baked in the sun, or twisted bamboos, interspersed here and there with ruinous bazaars, poor drinking water, coco trees and little gardens, and a few very large very fine and generally very dirty houses…the residences of the wealthy natives' (Nilsson 1968, p 67)

The physical aspect and reputation of north Kolkata was a deterrent in itself to Europeans, particularly during colonial times. The European population was

convinced that the area lacked fresh air and ventilation, which they believed could lead to disease. Kolkata's 'native town' was to be avoided, let alone recorded.

Not all descriptions of 'white town' were favourable. S.N. Mukherjee describes a far less salubrious experience for Europeans in colonial Kolkata based on health reports, obituary notices and reports in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of London. Some of these descriptions mention 'pariah dogs without an ounce of hair on them' who took baths along with other stray animals of the city, in the Lal Dighee or great tank from where Europeans and Indians consumed water. Open drains, humidity, jungles and stagnant ponds with mosquitoes meant Europeans led very unhealthy lives often dying early from dysentery or cholera or malaria (Mukherjee 1987, p. 18). There is no doubt the Indian population suffered most from these conditions, however, as the colonial city evolved, Europeans were also vulnerable to Kolkata's harsh climate and diseases. These rare glimpses of North Kolkata describe the conditions and hazards inherent in the location and times of the Great Houses, though it should be noted that these deprivations only began to be mentioned publicly in the 1850's, when the move to transfer the British capital from Kolkata to Delhi began to gain momentum. Reasons for the move other than imperial aspirations were needed so it was useful to change the public image of Kolkata, and these sometimes justifiable images of the city are still at play today.

The concern of this introduction to Kolkata is to give a broad overview of the study to follow. It is also a statement of the importance and timeliness of the study, and the connections between British and indigenous architecture and culture that blossomed within a particular class of Indians at a particular time in the history of colonial Kolkata. The following chapter describes the ways in which the study of these factors was undertaken and how research developed in order to gain an understanding of a subject that has remained largely unexplored until now.

3

THE PROCESS: STUDYING THE GREAT HOUSES AND THE GREAT FAMILIES

This study of the Great Houses encompassed a number of disjointed phases. The first half of this chapter deals with the way initial contacts were made by sending email letters to various heritage conservation and art related organisations. The photographic section of the study began after contact was established with groups in Kolkata who offered support for the study. The result of these contacts formed an important basis for the study, the sourcing of maps, plans, original images and the photo-documenting the extant Great Houses as they are today. Interviews with officials and journalists were obtained by telephone call initially or waiting for appointments at various government offices.

Introductions to the families for interviews involved a degree of social networking which was time consuming and at times difficult. The second half of the chapter deals with the search for information on the Great Houses in the literature and details of the way interviews were carried out in the city of Kolkata and for an insight to the *zamindari* estates, how research and interviews were carried out in rural West Bengal.

The study began with a chance visit to north Kolkata. To assess the feasibility of the study, letters and email letters of introduction were sent to a number of art, heritage and conservation organisations in India, including the Indian Foundation for the Arts [I.F.A], the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage [Intach] and the Foundation for Conservation and Research of Urban Traditional Architecture [C.R.U.T.A.]. The plan to photo-document the remaining Great Houses was met with considerable encouragement and approval. In this way, the study gained contacts and support in India. The Director of the I.F.A., Anmol Vellani, offered the addresses and phone numbers of contacts in Kolkata (2003) whom he felt would be helpful. Among them were Manish Chakraborty, a heritage architect and Nandita Palchoudhury, an

artist and Indian craft consultant and executive member of the I.F.A. In April 2004, a four-day reconnaissance exercise to Kolkata was made in view to meeting these contacts and assessing the feasibility of the study as a whole. During that visit Ms. Palchoudhury introduced me to G.M. Kapur, the convener of Intach. Through this meeting I was later given access to their documents on heritage buildings in Kolkata, which included a list of the Great Houses, their physical condition and heritage status as determined by Intach's historians and architects. The names of various heritage architects and academics were offered by G.M. Kapur. They included Professor Barun De, an architect and member of the Indian Council for Historic Research who classifies heritage buildings for both Intach and the heritage department of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation.

An introduction to Sonali Basu resulted in an invitation to visit her family's Great House in Bagbazar. These introductions made the research exercise establish some basic data, and established a network of invaluable contacts that remained supportive throughout the entire study. From the beginning the proposed study was met with interest, and despite the author being an outsider, was encouraged. Subsequently, the first month long research study was planned for November 2004. During this time many more houses were visited to interview families and photograph. Many of these visits were initiated through contacts formed on the earlier reconnaissance exercise.

Prior research - the Great Houses

Prior research and readily traceable data on the Great Houses is limited and this lack of documentation has been cited in many previous studies as a difficulty in forming a precise, in depth study of the Great Houses (Evenson 1989, p. 67). Historical documents indicate that approaches made to Kolkata's Great Families to view family documents were difficult even in colonial times. H.Beverley, after writing a history of the rise and growth of Kolkata as part of his Census Report of 1876, recommended that 'future historians of Kolkata should draw from the domestic archives of the leading Native families, besides official records and the notices of Eastern travellers. Subsequently, A.K.Ray, an Indian historian and Assistant Census Officer in 1901, applied to 'a great many Native families for assistance' when writing his short history of Kolkata in connection with the Census Report. However, very few families

responded, and the few who did promised to allow an inspection of the records in their family libraries 'failed to carry out their promise' (Deb 1977, p. ii).

It is certainly clear from this study that few indigenous families, including the Great Families, preserved family records, or they have lost them as they outgrew their ancestral homes or after the homes were divided up amongst the children. Papers and photographs often went missing over the generations or were damaged by Kolkata's harsh tropical climate. As Kolkata's British architecture and the lifestyles of the British during colonial times have been extensively recorded, this study uses excerpts by European residents and visitors to Kolkata for descriptions of the original interiors of the Great Houses and the ways the families entertained during the colonial period.

The lack of literature on the Great Houses was clear from the beginning of the study, confirming the gap in scholarship. These limitations meant a wide range of books and articles by both European and Indian writers and scholars were reviewed to identify what already had been done. Consequently pre-independence works by authors such as H.E. Busteed (1897), A.C.Campbell and J.Fergusson (1907 and 1876 respectively) and Krishna Deb (1905) were examined. Post independence studies that were reviewed included those by N.K. Sinha (1967) and P. Sinha (1978), works by R.R. Choudhury (1978), N. Evenson's *The Indian Metropolis* (1989) and J.P.Losty's *City of Palaces* (1990). Socio-geographic studies included S.Roy's *Calcutta; Society and Change* (1991), N.K. Bose's *Calcutta 1964* (1968) and P.T. Nair's *A History of Calcutta's Streets* (1987).

Aspects of rural Bengal were examined in sources such as *The Annals of Rural Bengal* by W. Hunter (1965) and J.Chatterji's, *Bengal Divided* (1995). M. Battacharyya's thesis, *Locating Identities* (2002), the 1990 edition of *Calcutta, the Living City* and S.Chattopadhyay's, *Representing Calcutta* (2005) were valuable for information on the Great Houses, and J. Lang's et al *Architecture and Independence* (1997) and G. Tillotson's *Paradigms of Indian Architecture* (1998), provided background information on architecture in India.

Works on northern Indian architecture such as T.R. Metcalf book *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj* (1989) were used to compare the architecture and palaces of northern India with those in Bengal. Esoteric works such as family

histories, fiction, guidebooks and heritage handbooks provided insights that have enriched this study, e.g. K.M. Ganguly, *A brief history of Andul Raj* (1900) and E.M. Forster's, *A Passage to India* (1984) and P.D.Gupta's *Ten Walks in Calcutta* (2000).

A number of original maps and some rare books, which included pertinent material on the Great Houses, were found by luck rather than intention at the open air book stalls on College Street in the centre of Kolkata. There, if a book stall does not have anything suitable; an assistant will be sent to inquire at other stalls. In very little time at all the whole area is aware of what is needed which results in a dozen exhausted 'runners' bringing books for approval. This system works exceedingly well and proved very successful. Local historians and architects who became interested in the work also offered some books and maps of Kolkata which were photocopied and two members of the Great Families offered family trees and histories written by amateur historians or members of the family long gone. These publications were supplemented by articles and features in newspapers. By contacting the relevant journalists and conducting interviews with them some names and phone numbers of Great Families were obtained. These journalists included Mike Flannery, the editor of *The Statesman*, Esha Battacharya, journalist with *The Statesman*, Arunya Sen, a photo-journalist with *The Telegraph* and Soumitra Das, art and cultural editor with *The Telegraph,* all in Kolkata.

Documentary and archival research was carried out at the National Library (Kolkata), the Asiatic Society (Kolkata), the library of the Victoria Memorial (Kolkata) and the Oriental and India Office Collections in the British Library (London). Despite diligent searching, information on the Great Houses was limited and documents and books in Kolkata were often in disarray or documents once found were deemed by libraries to be too brittle to allow photocopying. The climate of Kolkata has been a detriment to the sourcing of original documents in general. Biswarup Mukhopadhyay, in his 1998 handbook written in Bengali, comments on the lack of visual evidence, as photographs taken for his work *Fading Glories of Monarchism* had decayed 'beyond recovery' before publishing (Mukhopadhyay, 1998). The Oriental and India Office Collections hold mainly material related to the British architecture and ways of life, but little it appears written by Indians on the architecture or residences of their

wealthy elites. It is clear that the lack of findings covered in this chapter confirms the importance of the photo - documentation of the study.

Selecting the sample of Great Houses

The Kolkata Municipal Corporation (K.M.C.) lists over 800 historically, architecturally, and socio-culturally significant buildings as heritage sites in Kolkata. The most important of these are included in a 'first list' of 84 buildings and of these some 26 are residential (interview, Karforna, 2004). The present study utilised the 'first list,' methodically locating, photographing and gathering information on homes where possible and practical. A number of Great Houses (including the Roy's of Bartala, and the Basu's of Bagbazar) were not on the K.M.C. heritage list for various reasons; e.g. some residents were not in favour of heritage status due to the restrictions placed on them by the K.M.C. while other houses had been deleted from the list as they had deteriorated into ruins. However, despite their exclusion from the lists, many were suitable for this study. These more obscure private houses were made available for the study through personal introductions, as mentioned previously in this study. Due to the chaotic nature of Kolkata's streets, the difficulty in communication and the hidden aspects of the buildings, the initial selection to be studied was unfortunately but necessarily haphazard.

The sample eventually studied was determined based on the amount of information available to the author on a home. In many cases, locating the heritage residential buildings was time consuming and the results disappointing. For instance some sites were architecturally better than others and a number of reputed Great Houses were found to be British style bungalows or could not be described as 'Great'. In other cases buildings were in such disrepair that it was too dangerous to enter them. Many sites were obstructed by slum dwellings and could not be accessed without encroaching on the privacy and meagre living spaces of the occupants of these simple dwellings. Surprisingly, nearby residents were often unaware of, or uninterested in, the proximity of a Great House, making the search even more difficult. The following houses were studied, the first five of which were in non-urban or rural areas outside Kolkata.

1. The Andul Palace
2. The Burdwan Palace
3. The Bansberia Palace
4. The Maheshadal Palace
5. The Somra Palace
6. The Raja Nabakrishna Palace
7. The Jorosanko Palace
8. The Basu Palace
9. The Marble Palace
10. The Burdwan Palace
11. The Laha Palace
12. The Mullick Palace

The rural examples are included to form an understanding of the size and design of the *zamindari* estates, where many Great Families originated. A table giving more information on these houses is described in Chapter Six.

The rural sample

The rural Bengali way of life and the remnants of some *zamindari* houses are valuable in understanding how the designs of Kolkata's grand urban mansions and palaces developed. Many Great Families had rural or *zamindari* backgrounds, and the designs and ways of life on these large, sprawling estates had a direct impact on many aspects of Kolkata's early Great Houses. Though the *zamindari* system has now been abolished[14] and not many old rural estates can be found intact today, some estates remain therefore research was undertaken outside Kolkata to place the Great Families in their rural setting in view to a greater understanding of their pre-British backgrounds. The areas selected were determined from knowledge of a building, in the case of Andul and Burdwan estates, or from guide and amateur historian, Anup Sarcar. The estates were, Andul, Burdwan, Bansberia, Maheshadal and Somra.

The study of these examples were invaluable in gaining an insight into the size and types of buildings needed for running a large *zamindari* estate, the ways of life of early *zamindars* and the contrast in the ways of life of their descendents today. To document both urban and rural examples of Great Houses requires plans, elevations and often drawings. Few appear to exist.

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[14] The *zamindari* system was abolished by the Indian Government's Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms in 1950 (Bhattacharyay, 2002, p.131).

Accessing images of the Great Houses

The collection of drawings, plans and old urban maps presented in this study represents an endeavour to meet the need for accuracy. Though the photographic evidence is extensive, a photograph taken today inevitably includes additions made over the last sixty years as well as the built up areas around historic sites. Plans and drawings in contrast, offer the architect's original design unencumbered.

Drawings and plans

The search for plans and foot prints of the Great Houses centred mainly on the K.M.C's archives. Despite consuming a great amount of time, the difficulties in gaining access, and the frustrations of dealing with the bureaucracy, some valuable material for the study was obtained. Surveys of old street maps and plans of the city located the foot prints of the buildings used in the study. In some cases the plans show additions over the generations and the division of land. Only some of these maps and plans were made available for photocopying. These resources were important in comparing the contemporary photographs used in the study to provide the detail of the houses currently available.

The K.M.C. allowed examination of heritage documents, which uncovered the names of a very few builders and architects who designed the Great Houses used in the study. A valuable original plan was unexpectedly brought to light with the help of Milon Datta, who lives with generations of his family in one of Kolkata's Great Houses. Thus, again, the data and this study are highly biased by the availability of plans.

Photographic documentation

The lack of historical records for the study was discovered during the early stages of research in Kolkata. European artists did little to record the indigenous areas of the city and photographs if available, were often blurred photocopies of a faded original. For these reasons, photographic documentation to record the remaining Great Houses and their condition today was an important part of the study. Over three thousand photographs of Kolkata's heritage residences were taken over the length of the study

using a digital Canon camera (6.2 Megapixels), and downloaded into a computer for storage. These images were then identified, sometimes with help from specific interviewee's or local historians and architects, and collated into chronological order and the variables such as the architectural designs and interior styles were recorded. This photographic evidence was invaluable. By comparing contemporary photographs with original images, a more definite conclusion could be made on the name and history of the Great House being studied.

At all times the camera was in full view; no photographs were taken surreptitiously. In this way the camera served as an introduction and also a barrier. Firstly, the camera elicited curiosity, opened dialogue leading to offers of help or directions. Secondly, the large camera gave a certain professional authority which gave 'permission' to being in an area where tourists are rare. The photographs were used extensively to examine fine details, similarities or distinguishing differences that would otherwise have gone unnoticed or been forgotten. The variables could be compared and contrasted and photographs of interiors recorded many unusual elements, something a plan cannot achieve. By using both plans and photographs the visual aspect of the study is as complete as can be at the present. As the interiors of many of the Great Houses have not been photographed previously, the photographic collection is unique.

Where introductions had elicited invitations to visit and photograph a private house, residents allowed photographs of most areas, although in some cases private rooms were not offered for view. On the whole the photographic study was conducted delicately, with photographs taken only when invited to do so. This sensitive yet relaxed approach was successful in the sense of forming a rapport with the interviewees who seemed grateful there was no forced encroachment on their privacy. In return a number of family histories and memories were offered to the author. The successful outcome of this approach was evident in the warm invitations to return for further discussions.

In most instances it was necessary to take notes and photographs quickly, as residents and tenants were unable to understand the importance of their ancestral home being the subject of a university study and declined in depth interviews. The use of a tripod was abandoned early in the study for this reason and also because it was difficult to find level ground to support the camera securely on the tripod. Similarly the careful

taking of photographs was often seen as suspicious or the work of an amateur as the residents of the Great Houses experience of photography was often limited to the 'snap'. Notes and photographs taken hastily were important as there was always a chance that a visit could not be repeated and additional data obtained, although in some instances repeat visits were obtained (the Andul Palace, the Basu Palace and the Marble Palace). Each night notes were rewritten and the entire study was recorded daily in the form of a tape recorded diary. Copies of photographs were sent to the various families in gratitude, which also cemented a relationship that has continued.

Two exceptions to the above instances were the homes of the Mullick family (the Marble Palace), and the House of the Tagores in Jorosanko. As the Board of Trustees of the Marble Place do not allow even exterior photographs, a number of written and verbal approaches to the trust and family members over an extended period of time eventually resulted in the offer to photograph just one interior and one exterior image. Despite the desire to include a comprehensive documentation of the important home of Rabindranath Tagore authorities at the Great House rebuffed the original permissions granted by governmental agencies.

Interviewing owners and officials

This study on has been enriched by the personal accounts, memories and histories of some of the remaining direct descendents of the founders of the Great Houses. In some instances, these contributions made up for the limited documentation on aspects of the study, and gave glimpses of local and family histories otherwise unexplored. For instance, time spent at the home of Mitali and Ashutosh Law (a lawyer), who live in a family mansion in north Kolkata, elicited legal information on the ways old homes such as theirs were inherited. Pradeep Guptoo's family graciously allowed me to view their traditional, private religious practices and Partha Ghosh related his family's move from north Kolkata to south Kolkata. Aloke Laha's personal memories of his childhood were valuable in gaining a picture of life for a large extended family in one of Kolkata's Great Houses; Karuna Devi described the Burdwan Raj in it's hey day when hundreds of servants provided lavish entertainments for Indian and British dignitaries and Pradeep Mitra, the owner of the one hundred room Andul Palace, told of his family's difficulties in retaining their ancestral home.

Approximately forty interviews were conducted, and those of importance to this study are listed at the end of this thesis. As mentioned earlier, the sample of interviewees was determined on what house had been made available. The interviewees were involved either familially or professionally in the history of Kolkata and the Great Houses. The interviewees included, among others, the following descendents of the Great Families;

1. Sonali and Amit Basu of the Basu Palace, April, 2004
2. Aloke Laha of the Laha Palace, April, 2004
3. Pradeep Guptoo, descendent of a Great Family April, 2004
4. Karuna Devi of the Burdwan Palaces, November, 2004
5. Pradeep Mitra of the Andul Palace, November, 2004
6. Probal Deb of the Raja Nabakrishna Deb Palace, November, 2004
7. Hirendro Mullick of the Marble Palace, November, 2005
8. Milon Datta of the Ramdulal Dey Palace, November, 2005
9. The Narajol Royal family of the Gope Palace, November, 2005
10. Gautam Roy, descendent of a Great Family, November, 2005
11. Kanak Deb Roy of the Mahishadal Palace, December, 2007
12. The Mullick family of the Jorosanko Palace, November, 2007

In the main, the extant Great Houses are privately owned and personal permissions were requested to enter, photograph the exteriors and interiors and interview the occupants. Interviews were the most delicate stage of the research and the nature of the approach to the families was crucial. Though their wealth has diminished and their position in society has changed, they are used to, and expect a level of respect and courtesy. Often this process required an extended period of familiarity, while still maintaining a level of formality, before interviews related to the topic of the thesis were conducted.

Historians, architects and heritage experts and others involved professionally in the history of the Great Houses were interviewed between 2004 and 2007 and included among others:

1. Professor Barun De, heritage consultant for the K.M.C., October, 2005
2. Professor Ratshit, history and heritage, Kolkata University, October, 2005
3. Dr. Chitteranjan Panda, curator of the Victoria Memorial, November 2005
4. Anundo Karforna, chief architect the K.M.C., November, 2005
5. Debashish Nayak, heritage and conservation architect, April, 2006
6. G.M.Kapur, convener of Intach, November, 2004

7. Akhil Sarcar, architect, Kolkata historian and heritage consultant, November, 2005
8. Partha Ghosh, Kolkata historian, October, 2004
9. Ninima Debla, archivist, Intach, November, 2004
10. Anup Saha, government guide and amateur historian, November 2007
11. Manish Chakravorty, heritage and conservation architect, November, 2005

Obtaining permissions

No written requests obtaining permissions to interview residents were made for this study. From previous experiences in India, it was found to be more productive to obtain verbal permissions and arrange meetings once in India and not before. There was some unwillingness to commit to a meeting unless it was to be held within one or two days, therefore in many cases meetings were impromptu. It was important to remain flexible as arrangements were often changed and time was needed to allow for these changes. In most instances, meeting the owners and residents of Kolkata's Great Houses took place in a round about way involving a certain degree of perseverance. Casual conversations and tenuous clues were often the beginning of a meeting with people associated with the Great Houses that in some way would lead to tenants and owners. Sometimes a casual encounter while photographing outside a home would lead to an interest in the work and an impromptu invitation to view and photograph the interiors. Extraordinary and helpful encounters compensated for the lack of archival evidence and the trials and tribulations of the research. Social encountered a simple introduction to someone who 'lives in an old house' would often lead to rewarding encounters for the study. Some visits proved to be fruitless, or outside the time frame of this study.

The strength of this study

Despite the difficulty in sourcing texts, a substantial documentation was developed. The material obtained deemed sufficient evidence to form a comparatively accurate, original and timely study of the phenomenon that *was* the Great Houses. This study takes into account a range of topics: architectural, historical, political and social to gain a comprehensive view of the Great Houses as they were during colonial times and as they are today. In addition, the author gained access to the descendents of the

original founders of the Great Houses and the unique interviews offer first hand indications on ways of life during colonial times and how these aristocrats feel about their ancestral homes today, and their position in the twenty first century.

The study includes a range of detailed plans, maps and images developed during colonial times and an extensive photo-documentation of the houses today which shed new light on Kolkata's colonial experience. As some extant Great Houses, particularly the interiors, have been rarely photographed, these images strengthen the study and preserve some basic information on the Great Houses for posterity. As there has been little previous in-depth scholarship the study makes a contribution to both Kolkata and India's architectural history and establishes the need for an awareness of the present condition of the Great Houses and the reasons they should be conserved.

4

THE EMERGENCE OF
THE GREAT FAMILIES OF KOLKATA

A group of Kolkata's indigenous population rose in prominence during the mid to late eighteenth century to become known as the Great Families of Kolkata. This chapter examines the ways in which some families, in a colonial India, ascended in prominence, attained great wealth and position and the functions they performed in the given social and political situation. This understanding is necessary to understand the architecture of the Great Houses.

The Great Families through the seizing of a series of opportunities that arose from British colonial occupation, laws such as the Permanent Settlement Bill[1] (the nature and impact of the bill are described later in this chapter), the awarding of titles and the positions available for indigenous involvement in the day to day administration of the colonial system opened possibilities for entrepreneurial Bengalis to prosper as never before. Over the generations, the rise of the Great Families included their:

1. Successfully integrating into the rural world.
2. Becoming an influential class through the Permanent Settlement Bill.
3. Achieving a mutually satisfying relationship with the rulers of the day.
4. Creating high profile lifestyles as absentee landlords with fixed incomes.
5. Becoming extremely wealthy, building extravagant mansions in the city.

Many Great Families beginnings can be traced to the earliest of Bengal's prosperous merchant families: the Basaks and the Seths, who lived and traded upstream from Kolkata in the sixteenth century. Figure 4.1 shows the settlements north of Kolkata. When the Hooghley River began to silt up, these families were forced to move their trading bases downstream. Subsequently they founded the village of Govindapor, then expanded north and set up a cotton market in the village of Sutanati. A third village,

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[1] A bill introduced in Bengal in 1793 designed to create an aristocracy of landlords loyal to colonial authority.

Kalikata, was a quiet fishing village and less important, however, it was later that Kalikata, as mentioned earlier, became the site of the original British settlement These three riverine villages grew into the city of Kolkata (Losty 1990, p. 22). By the late seventeenth century, Sutanati or 'thread market,' began to flourish, particularly after the arrival of the British in 1690.

Figure 4.1. Van Den Broucke's Map of Bengal. Source, Ray, 1998, p. 109.

During the shipping season (September to March), markets of cotton yarn and chintz from the nearby village of Chitpore were set up to meet the demands of the British traders. This cotton market became very important and the Basaks and Seths controlled the entire trade (Nair, 1990, p. 10). While Kolkata developed from the British need for commerce and trade, it quickly became obvious to the British traders that local help would be required to administer to their needs and to help and advise them on local knowledge if they were to make profits. They soon decided that local indigenous traders were the most useful to help them build an empire and the Seths were both entrepreneurial and successful. Bhattacharya, in her dissertation, identifies the Basaks and Seths of Sutanati as leading families in the eighteenth century who not

only traded in cotton goods, but also opium and money lending to Europeans. Later their business changed course and they began investing in urban property (Bhattacharya, S. 1990, p. 206).

Nair confirms the importance of the Seth family. When the British obtained the *zamindari* rights for the three villages, they became the Seth's landlords, however, they allowed the Seths' concessions on their land in Sutanati with the explanation; 'being possessed of this ground…before we (the British) had possession of the towns, and being the Company's merchants and inhabitants of the place' (Nair, 1990, p. 10). These two families and others like them became closely associated with the British during the early growth of Kolkata. The dynasties begun by some of these early merchants occupy an important part of Kolkata's history and development and continued into the second and third generation.

The demands of the colonisers and the aspirations of the colonised

The British presence in Kolkata brought about administrative and economic changes which ultimately created a new subservient capitalist class who were upwardly mobile. These entrepreneurial Bengalis recognised the need for Western education and knowledge of the English language to open doors to the British mercantile houses and administration services and the opportunities they offered (Bose 1968, p. 31). This chapter examines how these opportunities and the intensity of the aspirations of these dominant families or elite groups led to the accumulation of great wealth and power in eighteenth century colonial Kolkata.

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya feels Pradip Sinha's description of these indigenous entrepreneurs as 'Comprador-Maharajahs', captures the essence of Bengal's merchant aristocracy (Bhattacharya, S 1990, p. 206). In a general sense they were the intermediaries of the British in the areas of trade and administration or what can be described today as a form of 'agent', obtaining provisions and services or by acting as bankers and cashiers for the British traders and leaders such as Robert Clive (1752-74) and Warren Hastings (1732-1818) during the eighteenth century. The prominence

of these *banians'[2]* or *dewans* (see Figure 4.2) gave them a unique position with the British, and Kolkata during the second half of the eighteenth century was a city of *banians* and *dewans*, most of whom were Bengali Hindus.

The role of the *banian* cannot be understated. The British relied on the *banian's* expertise to acquire the local knowledge they needed, consequently these Bengalis who went under the description of *banian* often held a variety of complex, influential roles. N.K. Sinha used judicial records of the 18th century to determine the kind of wide ranging talents and responsibilities a successful *banian* needed to work as an independent trader or within the East India Company. Aside from being an interpreter, book keeper, secretary, banker and 'keeper of secrets', a *banian* was also responsible for slaves and the employment of servants such as doormen, bearers of silver and palanquins and running footmen. A *banian* was known for his honesty and was responsible for the honesty of the under-servants he recommended. He could also be trusted for transacting business between an Englishman and a 'great black merchant' and commission for intermediary work was often so lucrative that a *banian* would pay a fee to an English gentlemen in certain posts for the influence they could acquire and the advantage of carrying on trade (N.K.Sinha 1967, p. 390).

British commercial successes lead to the rise of the *banian* and there were very few examples of an English gentleman doing without a *banian.* The Seths for instance brokered the first of the East India Company's financial and commercial dealings in Bengal (N.K. Sinha 1967, p. 387), and Raja Nabakrishna Deb[3], one of Kolkata's most influential indigenous elites began as a tutor in Persian to Warren Hastings during the first half of the eighteenth century and as a political *banian* for the East India Company. The rising Bengali elites used their titles and awards to establish themselves as the founding fathers of Kolkata's Great Houses. Motilal Sil is another example. Sil or Seal (1792-1854) was born in Kolkata and began as a small scale cloth merchant. He worked as a *banian* to various agency houses and established markets in Kolkata and later began purchasing *zamindaris*. By 1829 he was

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[2] *Banians* (also called *banyan*) or *dewans* were intermediaries for the British, deeply involved in everything from trade and administration to interpreting to the overall running of large British businesses and households. They were indispensable to the British during colonial times.
[3] Nabakrishna was awarded the title of Raja by the British but though N.K. Sinha refers to Nabakrishna's title as a Moghul award (Sinha 1967, p. 392).

established as a leading merchant and his wealth enabled him to build a palace on what is now Chitteranjan Street (N.K.Sinha 1967, p. 390).

Binay Ghosh distinguished four types of culture prevailing in various parts of Kolkata in the late eighteenth to mid nineteenth centuries:

1. Sutanati culture (north Kolkata): the new urban-feudal culture of the city rajas, of which Nabakrishna was the most influential.
2. Kalikata culture (central Kolkata): a mercantile culture propagated by the cloth merchants such as the Seths and Basaks. This culture was a combination of old and new elements.
3. Govindapore culture (south-central Kolkata): the new English culture of the Nabobs[4] or the *nouveaux riches*.
4. Bhabanipur culture (south Kolkata): middle class Hindu culture

(Deb, C. 1990, p. 60)

Figure 4.2. B. Solvyns, *A Banian*, 1794,
Source; Banerjee, 1981, p. 86.

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[4] A governor or wealthy landowner under Mughul rule but sometimes applied somewhat sarcastically to wealthy British entrepreneurs.

The landed gentry and the Permanent Settlement of Bengal

Many changes occurred in Bengal at the end of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century, when the educated upper class Bengalis became interested in investing in land. The British-created Permanent Settlement Bill supported this new interest in property by permitting new intermediary tenurial rights to rents from the land.

Britain's demands on the *zamindars* instigated the creation of the Permanent Settlement Bill, an important contract between the East India Company Government and the *zamindars,* or landholders, which was completed in 1793 under Governor Lord Cornwallis' administration. The bill provided for a three level economic, political and administrative structure; the British on the first level, the *zamindari* landlords on the second and the indentured peasant farmers on the third. The Bill created pressure for revenue, filtered down from the top and affecting all levels of rural society, in particular the poorest of India's population, the peasant farmers (N.K. Sinha 1967, p. 269).

For the British the Permanent Settlement Bill was valuable as;

1. It was the safest and cheapest means of securing and collecting revenue with minimum disturbance, and the landlords of the day were the most qualified to collect it.
2. It placed revenue on a regular and definite footing. Before the Permanent Settlement Bill neither the British nor the Indian landowners and revenue payers knew where they stood in regard to revenue collection and payment.
3. It created an alliance with the *zamindari* class, helpful in them acquiring knowledge, contacts and influence over other indigenous elites.

The implementation of the Bill allowed British officials to be placed in other positions of administration, rather than collecting rural revenue. The *zamindars* became the administrators and revenue collectors for the British. For the *zamindars* the Permanent Settlement Bill meant they were admitted into the colonial state system as the absolute proprietors of landed property with the privilege of holding their proprietary right at a rate which was supposed to continue unchanged for ever (N.K. Sinha 1967,

p. 268). The Permanent Settlement Bill however, was not hailed as a success by all landlords. Chitabarit Palit writes in his book that some *zamindars* felt British revenue assessments of their estates were too high (Palit 1998, p. 9). Loopholes in the Act were sought to lower the assessment figure. One such loophole was the auctioning off of *zamindaris* then the re-purchasing of them by their owners in order to be eligible for re-assessment. The Maharaja of Burdwan had the largest transaction of this kind after the introduction of the Permanent Settlement Bill. By transferring his huge landholdings (that had grown and prospered through the semi-feudal system) to his lawyers, he then re-purchased them for the benefits of re-assessment (Palit 1998, p. 10).

Almost all the rural estates suffered during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The *zamindars* struggled desperately to retain their land but many who had supported the British became impoverished by the financial pressure of the Permanent Settlement Bill. Unable to pay their dues, they eventually lost their lands. Consequently, the Permanent Settlement Bill became discredited within just three decades of its operation (Hunter 1965, p. 37). The most insidious aspect of the Permanent Settlement Bill was the Revenue Sale Law, or 'Sunset Law'. If the payment of any twelve instalments fell in arrears, the district officer of the East India Company could realise it in the following month. A large number of estates scattered all over Bengal were confiscated by the government for revenue arrears and then sold by auction. This was the beginning of the end for the old *zamindari* families. Many rising merchants of Kolkata came to own properties under the 'Sunset Law' (Mukherjee 1968, p. 126). This transfer of land from the ancient families to the new merchant class continued throughout the eighteenth century. They became the 'new' *zamindars*.

The 'new' *zamindars*; the rising merchants of Kolkata

If the eighteenth century had witnessed the rise of the great rural *zamindars* in Bengal, a new generation of landowners rose at their expense and replaced them. Kolkata's entrepreneurial *banians,* traders and merchants soon became estate-owning rentiers, purchasing established *zamindaris* in rural areas, buying up impoverished and reduced rural estates cheaply as well as establishing large estates in Kolkata. Very soon, land

ownership, not trade or industry became the basis of an extraordinary accumulation of wealth (Chatterji 1995, p. 5). Unlike the *zamindars* who lived on their estates, this rising merchant class that had come from diverse backgrounds such as estate management, government jobs and even the domestics of the British, could be absentee landlords thanks to the consequences of the Permanent Settlement Bill. Many reaped rent from their landed estates without ever having to set foot on them and some employed managers who were cruel and unscrupulous, and the peasants suffered. Despite these conflicts on their landed estates, this new generation of landlords were uninterested, preferring to spend their time in the growing city of Kolkata. As the old *zamindari* system disintegrated, a new educated class came into existence, who owed their allegiance to the British.

The character of the nineteenth century is epitomised by key figures such as Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846), who 'came from a pre-British background and acquired post British accomplishments' (Palit 1998, p. 23). Dwarkanath profited from his associations with the British and his role as *Dewan* of the Salt Board. His many other business and trade interests helped him amass a fortune which he then invested in the purchase of land. Dwarkanath had also inherited paternal rural estates and he continued to add to these with his purchases. Like many rising merchant families he became an absentee landlord who made only occasional visits to his estate (Bose 1968, p. 31). N.K. Sinha confirms the rise of many great merchants by examining complex wills and documents to show how fortunes were amassed through succession-rights and lawsuits, and how these profits were then later transformed into estates. He describes Dwarkanath Tagore as 'a landowner first and a merchant second' (Sinha 1965, p. 390).

The 'new' *zamindars*, the merchant class of Kolkata, were not interested in investing in the improvement of their land, despite British hopes to the contrary. They were only interested in increasing the rents on their tenant farmers. Ironically the British did not foresee this outcome, and the relationship between the landowners and the tenant farmers began to deteriorate. Consequently, estates became fragmented through family feuds, litigation and growing peasant unrest. The result of the Permanent Settlement Bill culminated in large peasant uprisings against all landowners in the 1870's (Palit 1998, p. 143). Despite such difficulties, land and property was still

considered the most desirable form of investment and landlordism was seen as a career.

For some of the really wealthy families this wealth manifested itself in the size and opulence of their homes and their increasingly *nouveaux riches*, hedonistic way of life. This Hindu dominated, Kolkata based phenomena became known as '*babu* culture'[5], born of Bengal's encounter with the west (Raychoudhuri, 1990, p. 68). This group consisted of absentee landlords, the new mercantile class and the *banians* of the British although not all exhibited the extravagant, showy *babu* traits. In the pre-British era '*babu*' was a title of honour and respect and to some extent in the early days of British rule.

Western educated Bengalis disliked the term as the British used it in a derogatory fashion and applied it for all Bengali Hindus, from people of the bazaars to the most eminent, unless they had some other title such as Raja or Maharaja. To the British, all Bengalis were *babus*, quaint and exotic figures, without the finesse of the British (Raychoudhuri 1990, p. 69). S.N.Mukherjee includes a statement by Fanny Parkes on Dwarkanath Tagore at the winter races in Kolkata:

> 'A cup of silver, given by a rich Bengali, Dwarkanath Tagore, was run
> for: the cup was elaborately worked and the workmanship was good; but
> the design was in excess of bad taste, such as only a *babu* would have
> approved'
>
> (Mukherjee 1993, p. 80-81).

'*Babu* Culture' was initially dominated by such Great Families as the Shovabazar Raj of Raja Nabakrishna. It should be noted that these ancient families were not the *bhadralok*[6] class, who were the western educated urbanised middle class and a

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[5] Wealthy merchants were usually called '*babus*' with often the prefix '*babu*' applied to their names. They were considered an upper class with distinctive taste and style. Later the term '*babu*' came to be associated with over indulgence and extravagance, and the term became one of ridicule by the British and the Indian lower classes (Bhattacharyya, 2002).

[6] The terms, *babu* and *bhadralok*, were interchangeable and used to describe respectable men. Wealthy merchants were usually called '*babus*' with often the prefix '*babu*' applied to their names. The *bhadralok* have been described as a 'western caste elite' and 'the upper crust of Bengali society' (Chatterji, 1995). In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries *bhadralok* were associated with the British through their linguistic, administrative and legal skills however, landowning was also an important part of the *bhadralok* value system (Bhattacharyya, 2002).They were considered an upper

product of the Bengali Renaissance. To place all wealthy Great Families as following the *babu* way of life would be simplistic. It was a complex term, summed up in part by the following passage:

> The word 'Babu' will have various meanings. To those who will be installed as the rulers of India known by the name of Englishmen, 'Babu' will mean clerk or shopkeeper. To the poor, the word 'Babu' will mean a richer man. To servants, 'Babu' will mean master
>
> (Raychoudhuri 1990, p. 71).

Although it is important to understand the sometimes subtle distinctions between the *babus* and the *bhadralok*, there are also many parallels. S.N.Mukherjee in his essay, uses a quote from 1868 referring to Ramdulel Dey, one of Kolkata's great merchants; 'There is an aristocracy which is not born but which can be made'. The English educated, wealthy men of Kolkata could easily move upwards into this new aristocracy, particularly as caste did not play an important role in *bhadralok* society (Mukherjee 1993, p. 72-73). Similarly, within the merchant class it was wealth and position that commanded titles and privileges, regardless of background or in some cases, caste.

Relationships between the rulers and the ruled

The structure and importance of the relationships, both commercial and social, that were formed between Indian merchants and Europeans in colonial Kolkata and the ways in which each group responded to their new situation needs to be recognised. So do the ways in which the British recognised indigenous loyalty and the later changes in attitudes on both sides of the colonial divide.

The British needed local experience and knowledge to help them succeed (Chattopadhyay 2005, p. 8). Consequently, great numbers of Indian scholars, intellectuals, teachers, scribes, priests, lawyers, officials, merchants and bankers were

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class with distinctive taste and style. In spite of the decline and diversification, the term *bhadralok* continued to carry more respectability than *babu* (Bhattacharyya, 2002).

channelled into the service of colonial rule. They became a vast army of clerks, interpreters, sub-inspectors, *munshis, pandits*, school masters and administrators who ran the day to day affairs of the East India Company and British entrepreneurs. Many were sought after by the British for their traditional learning and knowledge of Persian, the official language of Mughul India (Nair 1987, p. 19, 22).

Nair writes of Kolkata's Indian merchants, or *munshis* as being 'celebrities' who rose to fame by 'dint of their energy' to become leaders in their communities (Nair 1987, p. 19). The knowledge and information East India Company officials sought were necessary to issue commands and collect on-going information in order to rule. This was needed not only to assess and collect taxes and maintain law and order, but also to identify and classify groups within Indian society and to be certain their orders were being translated correctly. These aspects of colonial administration resulted in close relationships and exchanges of knowledge between both the rulers and the ruled. With the many and varied roles played by the indigenous elite in the running of the British administration, by the time East India Company rule was firmly established, so was the position of the elites.

Gokal Ghosal is an example of the trust and close relationships that developed between the rulers and the ruled. Ghosal was a *banian* who became successful after the Battle of Plassey. Like many of his fellow Bengali compatriots, he possessed the ability to rise above the level of intermediary, while still retaining advantageous links to the powerful English. Sinha uses mid-eighteenth century documents from a court case between Bengali Gokal Ghosal and European Daniel Hoissard concerning trade details, emphasising the fact that Ghosal 'collected all goods for the Company' (Sinha 1967, p. 391). Another judicial document of 1784 mentions Ghosal as a partner along with Thomas Rumbold.[7] The partnership involved the purchase of a ship 'on a scheme of trade to send opium to the eastward' (N.K. Sinha 1967, p. 391).

Hardgrave includes a quote by artist Balthazar Solvyns in his book which gives further insight into the role of entrepreneurial indigenous merchants in colonial Kolkata; 'they lend upon pledges at a very high rate of interest' and further, 'they are at the head of the most considerable trading houses of Hindoostan, which gives them

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[7] Thomas Rumbold was the Chief partner and later member of the Board and Committee of Works (Sinha, 1967 index).

that sort of respect which everywhere follows riches.' They have also been described as 'traders by commission,' who sent their *sircars,*[8] or brokers to buy goods which were then forwarded to their warehouses, or loaded on ships for export (Hardgrave 2006, p. 10).

Relationships were also established in other areas. Indian bankers lent large sums to the British and to private merchants and both Europeans and Indian elites invested speculatively in the property market. Many wealthy merchants who lived in north Kolkata and owned multiple properties there, also owned properties in the European areas throughout the city. These were mainly rented to Europeans (interview, Partha Ghose, 2005). Indian property owners would also employ European engineers and builders, who were part of the East India Company Department of Public Works, to design and build their mansions and palaces in north Kolkata.

Close contact with Europeans was advantageous to commerce but it also gave access to European ways of life, of vast interest to a people who were fascinated by their foreign rulers and who aspired to be like them and be seen as equals by them. In this way, not only western style and taste but British building methods found their way to the Great Houses of north Kolkata.

Social interaction was another way for the wealthy merchants to court the British. By inviting Britons to attend extravagant functions in their homes, particularly the *durga puja* celebrations, Indian hosts cemented their relationships with their colonial rulers while at the same time displaying their wealth and social position. William Prinsep's watercolour of a *durga puja* festival in what is thought to be either the composite of a great Hindu house, or the Palace of Raja Nabakrishna, shows a group of English men and women on the right, being entertained by a *nautch,* or dance, in a covered courtyard (see Figure 4.3). The image of the goddess *Durga* is enshrined in the background, while out of sight from the guests, on the left, is a goat about to be decapitated in honour of the goddess (Losty 1990, p. 110).

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[8] *Sircars* or *Sarcars* were also indigenous heads of European households and commercial establishments. When their employers were 'people of consequence' they assumed the title of *Dewan* (Nair,1987, p.18).

Prinsep uses a medley of architectural features which include classical columns, Hindu temple pillars and Mughul archways, typical of such houses in north Kolkata. The open courtyard is draped with a 'moon cloth' for the event and the traditional worship area, the *thakur dalan* is decorated with hanging lamps. On the left, the women and children of the family watch the proceedings from a balcony.

Figure 4.3. William Prinsep, *Entertainment during the Durga Puja'*.
Watercolour, 23x43.5 cm. c.1840. Source, Losty, 1992, p. 104-105.

There are many clear indications of solid social relationships between Indians and the British, exemplified in Maria Graham's[9] account of such an entertainment to which she was invited by Maharajah Rajkissen, son of Raja Nabakrishna;

> 'The Maha Rajah has a fine house at the end of the Chitpore bazaar. The room into which we were ushered was a square court, covered in for the occasion a red cloth, to which a profusion of white artificial flowers were fastened' and further, '…the Maharajah pressed us to remain, saying he had different sets of dancers , enough to exhibit the whole night. I was pleased with the attention the Rajah paid to his guests, whether Hindoos, Christians or Mussulmans; there was not one to whom he did not speak kindly, or pay some compliment on their entrance…'
> (Losty 1992, p. 112)

Descriptions such as these, offer an insight into the relationships between the rulers and the ruled and the culture and entertainments of the indigenous elites during colonial times that has remained largely unknown (see Figure 4.4).

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[9] Maria Graham was an Englishwoman living in Kolkata around 1811.

Figure 4.4. Balthazar Solvyns, Nautch, *Les Hindous*, Vol. 11 (1810), sec. 2, plate 1. 48 x 34.5 cm. Source, Hargrave, 2006, p. 13.

Conversely the British courted the indigenous elites with western style gifts. It was common for European governors to give gifts of clocks, telescopes and books illustrating the human anatomy to these wealthy Indians, thus emphasising Europe's scientific knowledge and superiority (interview, Jatri, 2007). The indigenous elite displayed these gifts in their homes as visible proof of their close association with the British; the high esteem accorded them and their desire to join with the British, meaning the wider, modern world (see Figures 4.5 and 4.6).

Figure 4.5. *Left*, longcase clock by Thomas McCabe, London (date unknown), in the Mullick family home, Pathuriaghata in 2007. Figure 4.6. *Right*, English bracket clock (date unknown), home of the Roy family of Bartala in 2005.

By shining light on how and why associations were formed between the British rulers, namely the British East India Company and later, after 1858, the British Government, and the indigenous elites, namely the merchants, traders and land owners of Kolkata,

it is clear that business and social interactions benefited both parties; the British gaining valuable knowledge of local customs and support from the elites. In return, Indians dealing with the upper levels of British administration not only benefited in wealth and position but also gained legitimate access to Kolkata's 'white town' and the style and taste of the European population. Many of the indigenous elites identified with their rulers and aspired to be like them. By adopting upper British class practices they sought to move upwards in Kolkata's colonial society. Through their architectural and cultural orientations, they hoped to ensure closer links with the British, giving them a higher status than their Indian contemporaries.

Their aspirations for assimilation with the British eventually placed them in a precarious position. The eventual dismissal of the indigenous elites by the British was a surprise and a disappointment to Kolkata's urban rajas, laying the seeds for joining the burgeoning movement for Independence from British control.

It should be noted that the close relationships formed between the elite Indian population and the British began to alter by the mid to late nineteenth century. With British rule firmly established there was no imperative to pursue the wealthy merchants and the British began to distance themselves from their subjects. They nevertheless, bestowed titles on their subjects.

Titles

One of the benefits of maintaining a close, loyal relationship with the British rulers was the acquisition and recognition of titles such as raja or maharajah. Most wealthy Indian elites, including Kolkata's wealthy merchants, actively pursued the visible trappings of success these titles brought, which included such things as jewelled swords or robes. With power in the hands of the British, and the aspirations of the wealthy merchants seeking status and acceptance by the British, this form of recognition by the British government was extremely important to the Indian elites (see Figures 4.7 and 4.8).

The paintings of titled rulers incorporated various signs, such as the inclusion of a western style chair or the image of Government House in the background, which went towards emphasising their close associations and loyalty to their British rulers and their knowledge of European ways of life and western ideals. Other marks of

distinction bestowed on Indian elites were an armorial ensign and crest from the college of arms in England and cannon for the purpose of salutes (see Figure 4.9). Courting these awards and marks of favour consumed a large amount of time, and not only titles but trivial matters such as seating arrangements or the order of presentation at audiences with British dignitaries were focussed on as ways to determine their standing with their colonial rulers (Metcalf 1979, p. 342).

Figure 4.7. *Left*, portrait of Sir Maharajah Jotendra Mohan Tagore, source, Campbell, 1907, p. 46.
Figure 4.8. *Right*, portrait of Maharaj Dhiraj Bijay Chand Mahtab Bahadur 111 of Burdwan. Source, Campbell, 1907, p. 56.

Figure 4.9. The cannon of the Andul Raj in 2004.

The British administration maintained detailed lists for an understanding of the hierarchy of the native population which were of interest to Indian elites. Inclusion in such maintained their status (Chattopadhaya 2005, p. 152). These lists were revised over the years, creating new sets of elites and indigenous rulers to replace the earlier ones in the hope that those selected for inclusion would be satisfied with status rather than becoming interested in political power. Only the largest landowners, whose families had settled in Kolkata in the eighteenth century, who were loyal to the British, and preferably with ties to pre-British princely states were included. These were the aristocrats of Bengal and many families had their family histories rewritten to be included in the prestigious lists. To impress the British these aristocrats had to prove their influence with the indigenous population, and in addition they needed to show their people they were worthy of the titles bestowed on them (Chattopadhyay 2005, p. 152). Extravagant spending played a large part in being seen as worthy or wealthy, which was further enhanced by the spirited rivalry between the wealthy families.

Pradyumna Mullick, who owned a Great House in north Kolkata, kept a fleet of fourteen Rolls Royces' and a carriage pulled by two zebras (Gupta and Chaliha 1990, p. 28). Gobindaram Mitra, the Collector's Deputy, known as the 'Black Zamindar', built a nine turreted Kali temple in Kurmatuli. His lavish spending over the two weeks of celebrations at *durga puja*, included the feeding and giving of gifts to a thousand Brahmins, and the offering of thirty to fifty *maunds*[10] of rice to the deity. Mitra's Great House at Kurmatuli was on fifty *bighas*[11] of land. He also had a villa, Nandan Bagan, where he housed his three favourite mistresses (Deb, C 1990, p. 59) Exploits such as these shocked and fascinated, and these stories are still retold today as a part of Kolkata's legends.

N. K. Sinha's *History of Bengal* identifies 'the structure of the opulent community in the second half of the 18th century'. The list of names was prepared by 'a member of a leading Kolkata family between 1822 and 1829 and was supplemented by family history and judicial records' (N.K. Sinha 1967, p. 392). The list was possibly requested by the British in 1822 and compiled by Radhakanta Deb, the grandson of

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[10] A *maund* was equal to 80 pounds.

Raja Nabakrishna (N.K. Sinha 1967, p. 392) Lists such as these, though not exact, help in understanding the extent and influence of the Great Families over a century.

It should be noted that the wealthy merchants were distinguished from the indigenous ruling class, who inherited their titles under the Mughuls. When the British East India Company traders arrived in the area now known as Kolkata in 1690, there were no men with the titles of raja or maharaja. The Nawab of Murshidabad was the Viceroy in Bengal of the Mughul Emperor and there were a few independent princes in Bengal. When the power of the Nawabs diminished, and after Tippu Sultan's[12] death, his wife and sons were settled by the British in the Kolkata suburb of Tollygunge (during the 1840's) and Wajid Ali Shah, the last independent ruler of Oudh, was exiled in Garden Reach, a suburb of Kolkata after his princely state was annexed by the British in 1856 (Nair 1987, p. 22).

The ruling class Rajas and Ranis of nearby small principalities that had not been annexed by the British flocked to Kolkata in the early part of the nineteenth century adding an interesting and exotic atmosphere to the social life of the city. Nair states that with additional titles conferred by the British to this class and the rising mercantile class, Kolkata developed the largest number of Maharajas, Maharanis, Rajas and Ranis living in one particular place in India during British rule (Nair 1987, p. 23).

As Kolkata grew after the arrival of the British and the indigenous merchants and bankers became indispensable to the British administration more and more had titles bestowed on them for their loyalty. These titles brought them power and influence as well as more wealth. The heads of erstwhile native kingdoms were awarded the title of Raja by the British and titles were also awarded for philanthropic work and large contributions to charity (Nair 1987, p. 23). Even the lowliest of awards were important in a community of people where personal dignity was highly regarded and errors in awarding them would cause heartache. The orderly process used by the British in bestowing honours was therefore appreciated compared to the haphazard process of their nawabi predecessors. In 1862 district officers were directed to prepare lists and locate the claimants concerned:

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[12] Tippu Sultan (1749-99) was the last of Mysore's nawabs. He was killed during the siege of Seringapatam.

'…of those gentlemen generally supposed to have some sort of claim to the title of 'raja'. Having prepared this list they should send for each person on it, hear what he has to say on the subject, examine such evidence documentary or oral as he may produce and then record their opinion pro and con'

(Metcalf 1979, p. 342).

The indigenous elites vied for these titles, which they felt represented the esteem and respect they deserved. Nabakrishna Deb was awarded the title of Raja Bahadur for his loyalty to the British during the Battle of Plassey, and Khestra Krishna Mitra of the Andul Raj was awarded the title of raja by Queen Victoria, the Empress of India. The ceremony was held at Buckingham Palace on Jan 2nd 1888, in the presence of the former Viceroy of India, Lord Rippon (1880 - 1884). The Raja of Andul also received a dress of honour with a jewelled sword and a diamond studded dagger (interview, Pradeep Mitra, 2004). The Andul Palace was also the setting for many grand social functions, with European guests such as Warren Hastings riding out on horseback with other dignitaries to enjoy the opulence and hospitality of the Andul Raj (interview, Pradeep Mitra, 2005). Even today, Kolkata's remaining Great Families are proud to relate in detail the honours and titles bestowed on their ancestors. Many, such as Princess Karuna Devi of the Burdwan Raj, still use these titles today.

The British had certain expectations of the recipients of major titles and insisted upon loyalty and a substantial effort in public service. Being in indigenous society was also important. The wealthy merchants were almost always rewarded, as were the *zamindars* of the largest estates. The more influential and wealthy, the more the British felt they were to be conciliated. The award of honours, or the promise of such, was certainly a device used by the British to encourage support for their activities. It was a successful strategy, as awards also encouraged strong competition between the Indian elite, thus keeping them apart and so more easily influenced

The Courts

As well as acquiring land in rural Bengal and the city of Kolkata, the Indian elite spent much of their time in long legal battles over land and property. The prosecution of lawsuits were hugely expensive, yet, if successful, had enormous rewards. Most legal battles centred on the division or sharing rights of property but feuding families

also resorted to litigation. Despite these legal battles being seen as wasteful extravagances, especially by the British, monetary rewards were not all that was at stake. A triumphant in court achieved an increase in esteem by other members of Kolkata's indigenous elites (Metcalf 1979, p. 347).

With the British prohibition of armed combat, the courts became one of the few places a landowner could still be victorious. A victory in court provided one of the most effective ways a landowner could visibly affirm to the world his power and position in society. The victor emerged from the court as a man of substance, no matter what his financial position. What was lost in court costs was compensated by the increase in influence and prestige.

Though the popularity of litigation and the pursuit of titles were both looked on unfavourably by the British (Metcalf 1979, p. 352), the legal system, for the indigenous elite, had the reputation of being a lottery in which anyone could hope to succeed.

One of the main reasons the wealthy indigenous elites pursued litigation was their attachment to their land. Their wealth and social position of the Great Families were aligned to their role and image as landed gentry. When a neighbour, a tenant or even a family member laid claim to their land, it would be defended aggressively (Metcalf 1979, p. 351). Conspicuous legal battles often drove landowners into debt, and even forced them to sell their properties, with urban lawyers being the only parties to benefit. Such outcomes drew critical comments by the British and sometimes brought agricultural progress to a halt (Metcalf 1979, p. 351).

Thei Great Houses of north Kolkata display the competition that evolved when a large number of extremely wealthy people were concentrated in a relatively small area. This competition was also fuelled by their aspirations to construct their homes and their way of life, at least partially, in the manner of the British. A new opulent urban culture emerged, epitomised by extravagant over-spending on large amounts of European furniture and numerous decorative items, especially by the beginning of the nineteenth century. The architecture and designs of houses and their appearance was a major indicator of their success. Other forms of success were through lavish entertainments, particularly during *durga puja*, Kolkata's most important religious

festival. Their way of life and the ways they saw their position in colonial Kolkata set them apart from their nawabi predecessors and their British contemporaries. These activities were the only ways left to confirm their position in colonial Kolkata. Opulent and extravagant ways of life, and the conspicuous ways the indigenous elite adorned themselves led to a marked change in attitude (during the nineteenth century) from both the British and the Indian population. These changes and their significance will be discussed in the following segment.

Nineteenth century politics of change

The first generation of Great Families were landowners. From their position as the dominant group in Bengal's agrarian society and enjoying a high level of attention from the British due to their privileged positions, by the end of the nineteenth century the landed gentry had begun to disintegrate. The late eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century (over six generations) was a critical period when the Great Families experienced significant changes and reacted to their new situation in various ways.

The wealth of Bengals *zamindars* had brought them to the city of Kolkata at a time when Sutanati, in the mid to late-eighteenth century, was a golden age for entrepreneurial Bengalis to make use of the British presence to raise their fortune in a relatively short time. For the wealthy in Kolkata it was a time of security, both financially and socially, and their grand mansions and palaces, where business and religious functions were carried out, were outward symbols of their success. At this time the way of life, dress, architecture and eating habits of many of the upper class Indians could be identified as being Western. During the next century however, wore on however, the Great Families began to experience dramatic changes and the business and social relationships established earlier with the British began to deteriorate. This nineteenth century shift in the relationship between the rulers and the ruled ushered in a new atmosphere of unease.

Despite having supported and served the British administration, Britain's attitudes towards their former indigenous allies began to change in response to the beginning of the movement for Independence. This change manifested itself in various political and social ways. For political reasons the former images of Kolkata as a pleasant colonial

city, full of entertainments and gaiety, were replaced by images of an unhealthy place. British accounts of Kolkata began to include descriptions of mosquitoes, insects, jackals, hyenas, pariah dogs, vultures and unbearable heat, dust and humidity.

These changes were revealed by reports in the newspapers of the day. An article in *Friend of India* in January 1837 describes the *durga puja* at the home of wealthy Indian merchant Dwarkanath Tagore as a 'splendid entertainment held for the most distinguished members of European society', continuing with a description of the 'Hindu proclivity for using sacred occasions to pollute their houses with European guests lured by viands and native dancing'. The article concluded that Christian guests had lost their attraction for entertainments in honour of Hindu deities and 'hardly honoured the *Babus* with their presence' (Choudhury 1978, p. 13).

The indigenous elite were outraged by this rejection and to seek revenge they excluded every European from their festivals, to the extent of employing a constabulary force 'to eject by imposition of hands any European who should dare enter' (Choudhury 1978, p. 13).

These changes in attitude by the British towards Indians and vice versa can be seen in other areas, even in the way the indigenous elites dressed. An article in the Reformer, in July 1837: '…our eyes are yet offended in the public streets and promenades with the sight of half naked baboos who appear in their carriages with nothing but a piece of cloth round their waist and another carelessly flung over their shoulder or suffered to drop on the seat'. Further, 'The people who are generally seen in this sort of undress possess enough money to maintain a carriage but not brains enough to discover the folly of appearing among decently clad people in such an indecent manner' (Choudhury, 1978, p.22).

The Indian elite were also to blame for this shift in thinking. During the nineteenth century many members of the Great Families had lost their way, following the decadent *babu* way of life and forgetting the work and ethics of their forebears. The *babus* were strongly criticised by both the British and Indians as many of them 'blindly imitated the English' in dress and manners (Raychoudhuri 1990, p.74). In

their work Kalighat[13] pavement artists began to use the *babus* as their subject, mocking their Prince Albert hairstyles; buckle boots and frock coats worn with their Indian *dhotis* and expensive shawls. These sardonic, comical images of the fashionable, wealthy and hedonistic Indian dandies were very different from the usual Kalighat images of Hindu gods and goddesses (see Figure 4.10). The work of the Khalighat painters offers ways of seeing cultural changes and the ways in which the *babus* were judged by their own people. This new, contemptuous attitude towards their former indigenous, aristocratic rulers was an unheeded clarion call of what was to come.

Figure 4.10. Kalighat painting of a *babu*, 1845.
Source, *Calcutta Heritage*, 1990, p. 65.

The *babu* no longer appeared as a 'Hindoo of an enlarged mind and a truly British spirit', as men like Prince Dwarakanath Tagore did to the British. Instead the babus were now described as, 'ungrateful Bengalis' and a 'microscopic minority who, enjoying under our government the highest degree of personal liberty…rave about

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[13] Kalighat paintings come from the area around the temple of Kali where village folk from rural Bengal settled, among them scroll painters and potters. They used watercolours and painted on inexpensive paper with bold strokes and contouring. This style of painting became known as 'kalighat,' and though the painter's began with religious themes, the cultural upheavals of the nineteenth century gradually infiltrated their work, expressing itself in images of foppish babus who aped the British. The images were designed to warn ordinary people from emulating a class of people who had degraded traditional Indian values.

patriotism and the degradation of their present position' (Mukherjee 1987. p. 23). Mukherjee notes that though the marriage between the British and their indigenous allies was not officially over the honeymoon definitely was, and this uneasy situation continued.

Mukherjee believes the Imperial partnership with the *babus*, which included the wealthy merchants and indigenous leaders, came to an end sometime during the late 1840's, and feels a description of the end of the cold season made in 1863 is a fitting way to also describe the end of the long relationship between Kolkata and the British;

> The last waltz has been danced in the assembly rooms; the last wicket has been pitched on the cricket ground; the last tiffin eaten in the Botanical Gardens; the last couple married in the cathedral, at the very sensible and uncanonical hour of half past five in the afternoon. People have settled themselves down to be claming and gloomy and hepatic for six gruelling months'.
>
> (cited in Mukherjee, 1987, p.23).

Mukherjee points out the poignancy of the description, writing that the British 'had to settle down, not for six gruelling months but for eight grilling decades before the national flag of India was hoisted in Government House, the palace that Lord Wellesley built for his Imperial city in the east' (Mukherjee, 1987, p.23).

It should be mentioned that in contrast to the *babu* way of life many wealthy elites felt this way of life symbolised the deterioration of traditional Indian values and instead chose to follow pious lives, devoting themselves to charitable causes such supporting priests, building temples, sponsoring students and feeding the poor (interviews, Nathany, 2004, Mullick, 2005)

By the late-nineteenth century the British no longer needed the indigenous elites to secure their position in India. In response, these former influential Indians were unhappy with the way they were treated by Government officers. While they were still willing to let the British bestow honours and titles, even Indian ones, because that was still the unconditional prerogative of the ruling authority, they did resent the snubs they were subjected to in their daily dealings with the British (Metcalf 1979, p. 346). Indigenous elites complained of being kept outside official buildings when summoned for meetings, and of

having to wait for long periods in the hot sun. Metcalf notes that newspapers of the day regularly mentioned that Indian elites had been searched for weapons at the door of official buildings, and snubbed by British officials who refused to shake hands or who walked out of entertainments given in their honour. A quote from the novel, *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster is referred to by Metcalf as an insight into the way many British felt; that all Indians, whatever their rank or title, were an inferior breed. In the novel, the English woman comments, 'don't forget that you are superior to everyone in India except one or two of the Ranis and they are on an equality' (Metcalf 1979 p. 346).

To a people who were accustomed to the graduations of rank, courtesy and deference, this disrespect was devastating, however, in Kolkata in the late nineteenth century there was no solution to the problem.

By first examining the rise in prominence of the Great Families in the mid to late eighteenth century this chapter has identified the many roles of a *banian* and their accumulation of wealth over a long period and the importance of the Permanent Settlement Bill in attracting them towards investing in land and properties. Secondly, this chapter has shown the loyalty afforded the British by their wealthy subjects, and the consequent awarding of titles. These titles gave the indigenous elite social and political prominence and created mutually beneficial relationships which enabled them to achieve, in some way, the western ideals and European way of life they aspired to. These relationships however, were certainly one-sided, as exemplified in the nineteenth century. To the wealthy, extravagant indigenous elites, the building of opulent mansions and palaces was the fulcrum of their wealth and success and the most obvious symbol of their close relationship with the British rulers. The buildings they identified with and emulated are described in the following chapter.

5

THE ARCHITECTURE OF BRITISH KOLKATA

Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai were all developed by the British under the direct control of the British East India Company from the beginning of the British rule, and after 1857, when they were administered under Queen Victoria's reign. When the British established their Imperial presence in India, they brought their own world vision and ideas of what they thought of as 'home'. With their long history of architectural styles on which to draw, particularly the Classical style popular in Britain at the time, the colonial settlements introduced architectural elements that were new to India (Lang et al 1997, p. 73). Kolkata is the most neo-classical of British India's Presidency cities. The British buildings that became prolific in the city's 'white town' reflected Britain's change from being traders to becoming rulers. The response of the indigenous elites to these new architectural forms resulted in the architecture of the Great Houses.

Even though metropolitan Kolkata pre-dated 1750, from that date to 1850 the architecture of the European business and residential district was motivated by the need to create a powerful image of British superiority (Lang et al 1997 p. 73). In Kolkata the Classical architectural style was a conscious choice by Britain to strengthen their position and to represent the power and permanence they felt was needed to rule India. While the Classical gave way to the Neo-Gothic in Mumbai and the Indo-Saracenic in Chennai, the Classical ruled in Kolkata. Consequently Kolkata became the most European looking city in India. The Classical building style had the advantage of its universality as it was based on a series of rules, which could be learned and applied by anyone, anywhere and most importantly, could be transplanted to the colonies (Evenson 1989, p. 47).

With Mughul architectural examples in far away Murshidabad, and as Kolkata was the Imperial capital with no former indigenous architectural models of significance, Kolkata's wealthy Bengali families could not help but notice and be impressed by the British Classical style buildings that arose after 1800. Examples are Government House (1803), the Kolkata High Court (1872), the Writers Building (1880), and the General Post Office (1864).

As these Classical buildings made a 'show of splendour to suggest power' wealthy Indians followed their lead, aspiring to equivalent power by building their own palaces on similar lines as the British. These Indian reactions were welcomed by the British as they followed the British Government's policy of 'Westernising Indian society' (Tillotson 1989, p. 26).

Around 1800 British architecture in India received 'an exciting new model' in the building of Government Houses in Kolkata and Chennai (see Figure 4.1) (Tillotson 1989, p. 3). Both were intended to reflect the lordly image of the new rulers, but as Tillotson observes they were 'not necessarily a rise in quality of design but a decided rise in pretentiousness'. Kolkata's Government House was built between 1799 and 1803 on the order of the Marquis of Wellesley.

Figure 5.1. Kolkata's Government House or *Raj Bhavan* in 2004.

The designer of Government House was Charles Wyatt, an officer in the Bengal Engineers (1759-1819) and from an architectural family prominent in Britain at the time. Wyatt based his design on James Paine's and Robert Adam's Keddleston Hall (see Figure 5.2) in Derbyshire. While the basic features of Keddleston, such as the Palladian front and the Dome, have been faithfully copied, Kolkata's Government House is a much larger, three storied structure. This grand building became a model for many British and Indian buildings in colonial Kolkata such as the former home of merchant Horen Sil; now the Lohia Matri Sewasadan, or maternity hospital. The grand entrance gate with lion atop is also a reference the entrance gate of Government House (see Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.2. Keddleston Hall, Derbyshire. Photograph by Mathew Antrobus. Source accessed on, www.nationaltrust.org.uk

Figure 5.3. The Lohia Matri Sewasadan (maternity hospital), in 2005. Below, detail of the gate.

The plan of Kolkata's Government House and Kedleston Hall (see Figures 5.4 and 5.5) consisted of a central block and four detached wings linked to the centre by curving corridors. This allowed for the free circulation of air and so was an excellent choice for Kolkata's tropical climate.
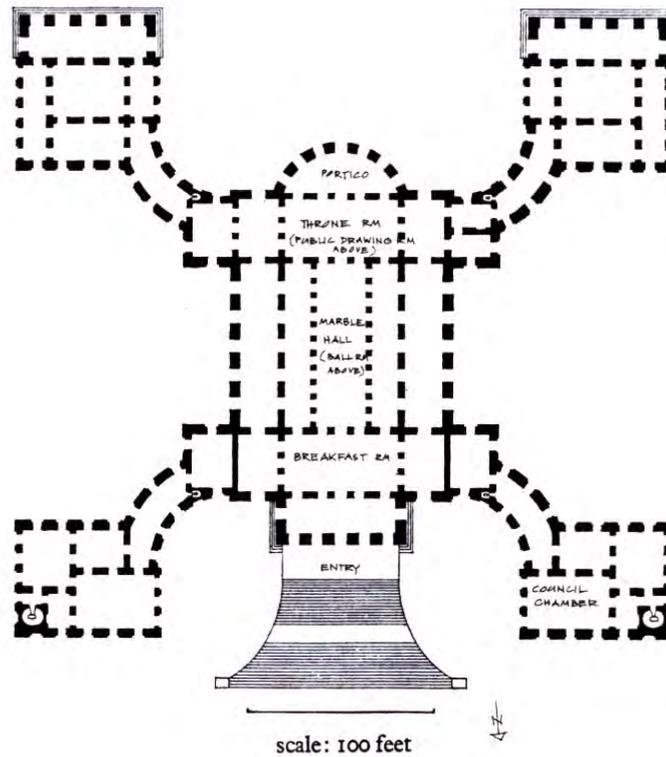
Figure 5.4. Right, Ground plans of Kolkata's Government House, 1803.
Source, Chattopadhyay, 2006, p. 115.
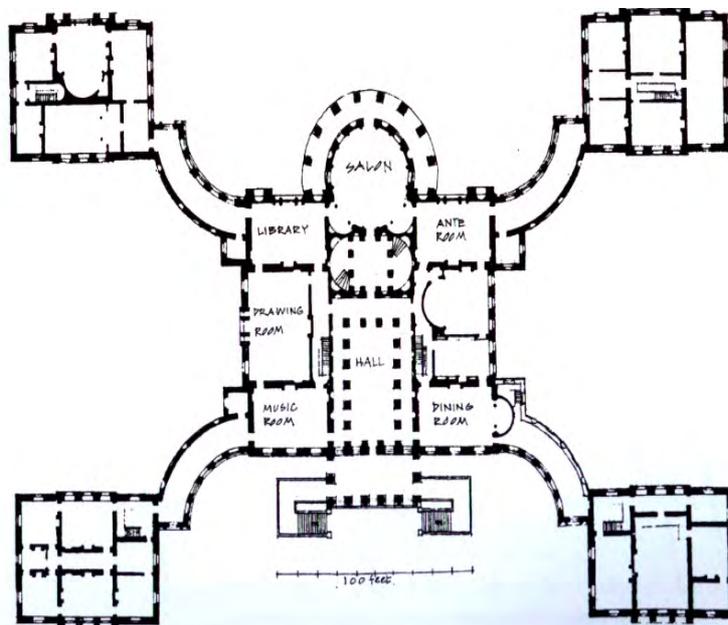
Figure 5.5. Ground plans of Keddleston Hall, Derbyshire, 1761.

Government House was built of brick covered in white plaster that was rewashed every year. The building was on a grander scale than any colonial building in the city of Kolkata, befitting Wellesley's ideas and confirmed by Valentia in the following justification of his extravagance in 1809;

'The sums expended on it have been extravagant…but India is a country of splendour of extravagance, of outward appearances. The head of a mighty Empire ought to conform himself to the prejudices of the country he rules over, in short I wish India to be ruled from a palace not a country house; with the ideas of a Prince, not with those of a retail dealer in muslins and indigo' (Losty 1990, p. 76).

Kolkata's Government House was lavish and built to last. Its grand and impressive façade and ballrooms, throne room and marble hall, shown in Figures 5.6 and 5.7, were designed for formal ceremonial occasions, however it must be noted that the design of Government House was entrusted to an engineer, not an architect.

Figure 5.6. The 'throne room' of the *Raj Bhavan* or Government House in 2005.

Figure 5.7. The Marble Hall of Government House in 2005.

Belvedere was another well known British building in colonial Kolkata (see Figure 5.8) however there is very little on its exact history. It is believed to stand on the site of a summerhouse belonging to Prince Azim-us San. After the Battle of Plassey, when Robert Clive restored Mir Jafar to the throne of Bengal, the nawab gave Warren Hastings the entire property at Alipore as a gesture of gratitude for the East India Company's protection.

The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal resided in Belvedere until the capital of India was moved from Kolkata to Delhi in 1911. Consequently the position was upgraded to Governor and the holder transferred residence to Government House, which today serves as the residence of the Governor of the Indian state of West Bengal, now Bangla. Belvedere was described as 'large, commodious and well known' (Doig 1966, p. 28)

Around 1778 Hastings sold the property, now called Belvedere House to a Major Tolly who died not long after in 1780 (Dutta 2003, p. 67). Later it was the winter residence of the British Viceroys and today it houses the National Library which took possession in 1953. Architecturally the home built by Hastings has been described as 'a hotch potch of style and proportion, best described as free Italian Renaissance style developed on an ordinary Anglo-Indian building' (Doig 1966, p. 28). It is probable that the design of the Law family's mansion was influenced by Belvedere House (see Chapter Six).

Figure 5.8. Belvedere House, now the National Library, in 2005

Other officers in the Bengal Engineers produced major buildings in Kolkata. Major John Garstin designed the Palladian style Town Hall (1813-15) and Major-General W.Nairn Forbes designed the Indian Government Silver Mint (1824–30) in Strand Road in Greek revival style, a copy of the Temple of Minerva in Athens, though it is half the size (Lang et al. 1997, p. 63). This impressive building is square in design with outer wings and an arcaded central quadrangle. Today the Mint is empty and decaying and under threat from developers. The General Post Office (1864-8) and the Indian Museum (1875) (see Figures 5.9, 5.10, 5.11, 5.12) were both designed by Walter Granville (1819-74) and exemplify Classical architecture.

Figure 5.9. *Left*. The General Post Office (1843-8), B.B.D.Bag in 2004. Figure 5.10. *Right*. The courtyard of the Indian Museum (1875) in 2006. Courtesy of A. Louth.

Figure 5.11, 5.12. The entrance to the Indian Museum in 2006. Courtesy A. Louth

The Bishop's Palace is one of the last extant palaces on Chowringhee Road, now Jawaharlal Nehru Street (see Figure 5.13). The façade and ionic capitals of the Bishop's Palace is now partly obscured, however, its elegant simplicity makes it difficult to imagine this building being a model for the ornate Great Houses. The palace features a row of Ionic columns with elegant capitals between which hang very large louvered screens, behind which are Hindu temple inspired arches. The church maintains the building therefore it is in reasonable condition. Though somewhat forgotten, it is an important building.
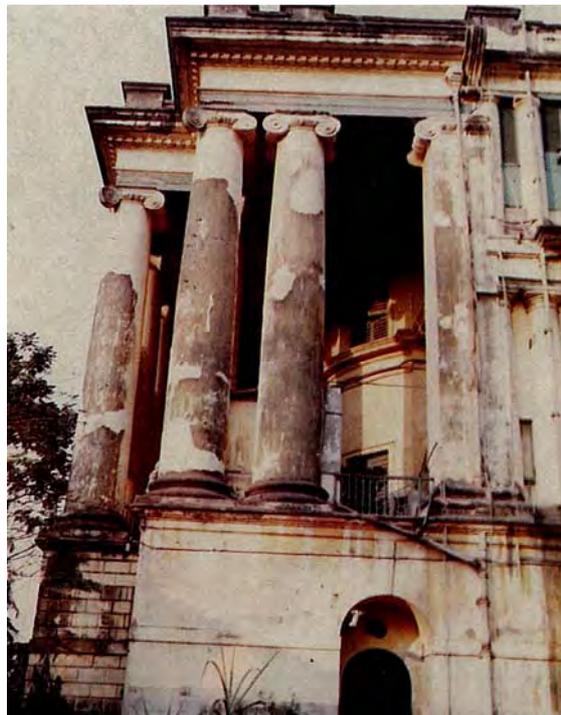
Figure 5.13. The Bishops Palace, 1849. Source, Mukherji 1991, p.21

Overall, Kolkata has remained a predominantly Classical city. Indeed the Mint built in post-Independence India is a Classical building. As well as large government buildings, many private homes were being built in the Classical style, particularly in the Chowringhee area, though most have long since gone. The major buildings became the models for many wealthy Bengali residences. Many of the British buildings were designed by engineers and architects. Their connections, if any, with the Great Houses of the indigenous elites is open to question.

Engineers and architects in colonial Kolkata

In the eighteenth century architecture was not a high priority for the British East India Company and so very few trained European architects travelled to the colonies. Consequently, the Company was content when an engineer on site could design and supervise the erection of something serviceable. Therefore the majority of the East India Company's architectural work in Kolkata was carried out by military engineers. Tillotson notes that 'little can be said' of the results (Tillotson 1989, p. 4) and this can partly be explained as military engineers were trained more in fortification than civil architecture. Lang et al., describe Kolkata's Gothic Writers Building of 1780, the headquarters of the 'writers' or junior servants of the East India Company, as a 'barracks block' (Lang et al 1997, p. 60), (see Figures 5.14, 5.15). Today, the Writers Building is the seat of the West Bengal government secretariat.
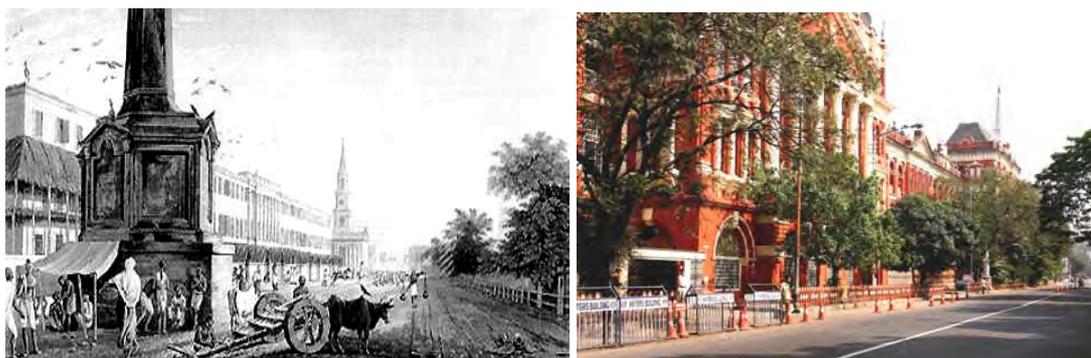
Figure 5.14. *Left*, James Fraser, 'A View of Writer's Buildings',1819, Source, Losty 1990 p. 84.
Figure 5.15. *Right*, the Writers Building in 2004.

The extent of this practice of using engineers was revealed in 1871 when Britain's Royal Engineering College at Cooper's Hill in England, was created to specifically train civil engineers for the Indian Public Works Department. Junior officers received

a course in architecture with a view to their future contribution to the colonies (Evenson 1989, p. 48). Engineering colleges developed in India, in particular the Thomason Civil Engineering College at Roorki. However, the British felt those educated at Cooper's Hill were superior and so were consequently employed in the elite 'Imperial service'. Indian trained engineers mainly went into the area of 'provincial service' (Evenson 1989, p. 48).

Among the architects who did travel to Kolkata were John Fortnom, the Company's official civil architect from 1756 to 1779, Lieutenant James Agg who designed St. Johns Church, Colonel John Garstin, who was responsible for the Town Hall and Edward Tiretta, a city civil architect from Venice who spent many years working in Kolkata. Tiretta was the East India Company's architect until 1803, and cooperated in the designing of Government House. Tiretta, along with Duncan McLeod of the Bengal engineers was also involved in the design of the *Hazar Dwari*, the nawab's palace in Murshidabad[14] which was completed in 1837. The nawab's appreciation of the British model is confirmed by his ordering of the plans of Government House from the European engineers who built it (see Figure 5.16).

Figure 5.16. The Hazar Dwari (1837), Murshidabad.
Source, www.indiaprofile.com/monuments-temples/murshidabad.htm

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[14] The puppet governor of Bengal in 1757, Mir Jafar, modelled his own residence, the *Hazar Dwari* (completed in 1837), on Kolkata's Government House. This grand palace in Murshidabad, on the river Ganges is a three storied edifice, with 114 rooms and 8 galleries, all in Classical style. The original palace (today a museum), was spread over 41 acres and came to be known as the 'House of a Thousand Doors'. Within two decades it was followed by grand 'Indo-Saracenic' buildings by the maharajahs, many of them planned and built by the East India Company engineers (Mitter, 1995).

With Britain's status and responsibility to govern territories under their control, the British administration needed the Indian population to see it as a powerful, civilising force. Barracks, forts, housing for soldiers and other assorted buildings were not aesthetically as important as the buildings of government and church, where a more assertive architectural style was needed to proclaim Britain's power and supremacy.

Buildings such as Government House and the Town Hall show a close following to the changing trends in Britain, and also the continued influence of the 'pattern books', from which the bulk of the Company's designs was carried out. These pattern books conformed more or less to Europe's Greco-Roman heritage, and also incorporated ideas on the form architecture 'should' take, depending on its function. The impact of pattern books was so popular; their influence was seen after each book was published.

Pattern books were also influential in the design of churches. Among the earliest of a large number of British churches in India is St John's Church in Kolkata, which was designed by army engineer Lieutenant James Agg, who also designed Warren Hastings' garden house in Alipore. St John's is loosely based on James Gibbs' designs for St Martin in the Fields, the designs of which had been published earlier by Gibbs in his '*A Book of Architecture of 1728'.* Also, James Paine's *Plans, Elevations and Sections of Noblemen's and Gentlemen's Houses* published in 1728, contained the plans for Keddleston Hall (1761-8) in Derbyshire, designed by Robert Adam. As mentioned earlier, Keddleston Hall became the model for Kolkata's Government House built between 1799 and 1803 (Tillotson 1989, p. 4).

Pattern books showed how to put together different elements and combine them into a building. Many military engineers depended on them to fill the gaps in their training. Indeed, many British buildings in India were assembled from the pages of the most popular pattern books of the time, which included Colin Campbell's *Vitruvius Britannicus*, the publications of Stuart and Revett, William Chambers and the Adams' (Tillotson 1989, p. 4). The later publication of Leoni's *The Architecture of Andrea Palladio,*(see Figure 5.17), which included prototypes for country mansions, popular in Britain at the time, resulted in Palladio's simpler Neo-Classical architectural designs becoming the model for many engineers and the form for much of Kolkata's British buildings (Evenson 1989, p. 48). Palladio's designs were able to create the illusion of grandeur within financial limitations.
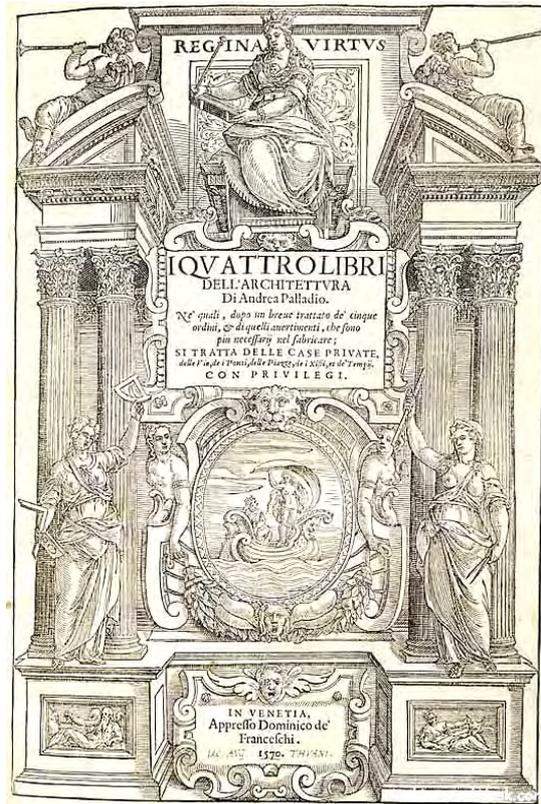
Figure 5.17. The title page of Palladio's *Four Books of Architecture* (1570). Source, Tavernor, R. 'Palladio's Four Books on Architecture' ArchitectureWeek.com March 2008.

Three primary types of exterior elevations characterize a building as Palladian; the loggia with three openings; the Greek temple front with pediments and columns and the double-columned loggia (see Figure 5.18). It is probable that a design derived from a Classical Greek temple, an abode of the gods, would have appealed to the founders of the Great Houses. In the sixteenth century Palladio's Greek temple designs for residential buildings were innovative. When the British revived Neo-Classical designs like Palladio's in Kolkata, the Great Families also saw them as innovative, new and exciting. As the choice of the British, dramatic exterior motifs soon became the choice of the indigenous elites.

Palladianism is described by Tillotson in his book as 'bland' and 'scarcely the best model' however, the practice of Indian architects and engineers deriving their practical knowledge of the Classical tradition were through the use of pattern books. In some instances, imperfect instructions were given to local native masons, the result of which meant that masons fell back on their own traditions. In many instances, the Indian masons received their instruction from Europeans with little more knowledge,

and many errors against the classical canon were made in colonial Kolkata (Tillotson 1989, p. 4).
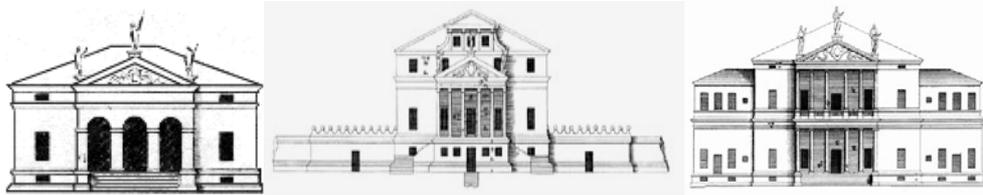
Figure 5.18. Palladio's exterior elevations. Source, Boglewood Corporation, *Palladio's Italian Villas*, Mar.2008 www.boglewood.com/palladio/

Evenson in her book writes that the British drew analogies between building construction and human character. The term *puckah*, or *pukka* came into use to describe a permanent, well made construction; indeed a mixture of brick and mortar, composed of brick dust, molasses and cut hemp which when dry became as hard and strong as stone. A *puckah* building (see Figure 5.19, 5.20) was differentiated from the native *cutcha* building which in contrast was made of temporary materials such as bamboo; mud and thatch. Over time the ideal British man in India became the *pukka sahib*, as impervious and indestructible as stone and the architect of an equally *pukka* empire (Evenson 1989, p. 47). The Indian elites were also concerned with permanency (and image) when building their Great Houses, as evidenced in the ways British building methods were emulated. As well as civil engineers, local masons, or *munshi*, were also employed by the Great Families to design and build their new mansions. In some instances owners would simply give the *munshi* instructions as to the number of rooms required only, and then leave the final decision on the style and decoration to the *munshi* and his team of craftsmen.

Figure 5.19. *Left*, the original plasterwork of the Andul Palace in 2004. Figure 5.20. *Right*, detail of the construction of the Andul Palace in 2004.

These tradesmen and craftsmen 'inherited' their professions from their parents and grandparents often staying in the same job their entire lives. Consequently, the Great Families often dealt with tradesmen's families who had worked for them for generations. After Independence in 1947, these long traditions changed somewhat as Partition forced many tradespeople to move. In addition, the declining wealth of the Great Families also forced craftsmen to seek work in other fields.

The Basu family's Great House in Bagbazar (1876) was built by Indian engineer Nilmony Mitra (1828-94), who graduated from the Duff College in Kolkata in 1848 then trained at Roorki College, graduating in civil engineering in 1851. Siddhartha Ghosh describes Mitra as 'a brilliantly innovative engineer from the professional upper classes', and one of the first two Bengalis to pass out from Roorki. The second was Madhusudan Chatterji (1824-1909) who passed out in 1852 (Ghosh, S 1990, p. 255). Mitra began his career as an Additional Architect of the Bengal Presidency and by 1858 had risen to the position of Assistant Engineer. Mitra lived in Tala, near Bagbazar, and built a number of mansions in the area after completing the Basu residence, which included the Prasad (palace) of Maharajah Jatindra Mohan Tagore in Pathuriaghata (see Figure 5.21, 5.22) and the remodelling of the Emerald Bower described in Chapter Six (Bhattacharyya 2002, p. 186).

Figure 5.21. *Left*, the Prasad during colonial times. Source, Campbell 1907 p. 185. Figure 5.22. *Right*, the Prasad in 2004.

A catalogue compiled for the Glasgow International Exhibition of 1888 titled 'Art manufactures of India' stated that the 'preponderance of European influence in the Indian mind' and the lack of interest by Europeans in indigenous art led to the complete discouragement of indigenous architecture as well as Indian builders becoming indifferent to their own style of work. Educated Indians associated

European style with enlightenment and progress. The ruling class, who led monotonous lives compared to the merchants, spent large amounts on building and often kept a native architect as part of their domestic staff. Such architects were warned that 'nothing in the Indian style can be tolerated' (Mukharji 1974). Only the most palatial of British administrative buildings were to be emulated.

Kolkata's British architecture however, was essentially hybrid. Colesworthy Grant, an acute observer, however, noted that few Europeans were willing to admit that their buildings were also products of a hybrid colonial culture. While the neo-classical architecture of 'black town' was readily dismissed as inauthentic, the Europeans of colonial Kolkata could not see that the hybridity of their grand buildings and residences were also largely inauthentic (Chattopadhyay 2000, p. 177).

The British did take certain indigenous design concerns into account, particularly the demands that the climate imposed on architecture. Consequently, British builders in India agreed that a successful colonial building incorporated or adapted some elements of indigenous design. In particular the British found the single storeyed bungalow with pitched roof and verandah and set in a spacious compound most suitable for their private residences. This design differed from the indigenous bungalow, but allowed for the ventilation needed for a hot climate. In public buildings as well, indigenous designs and structural elements such as thick walls, columns, balconies and piers were deemed necessary for comfort and keeping the heat at bay (Metcalf 2005, p. 6).

As the number of classical architectural models grew in 'white town', so did classical details become more common in the Indian mansions and palaces in north Kolkata. Decorative European facades with massive pediments, extended colonnades and ornate capitals began to appear. The designs were unrestrained as the new European styles and decorative elements became introduced into the still popular Mughul and Indian designs, creating an eclectic architectural whole. This new style was not only an outward show of their progressive ideas but also their close association with the rulers of the day, and the social and political prestige that entailed. Ideas of the homes as a private place of residence and family worship also began to change as Indian elites interacted with the British, increasing their feelings of cultural alignment. Accordingly, designs began including areas for the carrying on of business and the

entertaining of Europeans. Thus the houses began to display new, hybrid outward signs of what was perceived as style, wealth, taste and success.

Soon, not just British architecture but the architecture of the indigenous elite's residences became a new benchmark for designs among wealthy indigenous society. In this way, hybrid eclecticism developed in an area where the wealthy families competed with one another in the opulence and extravagance of their residences. The next chapter in this story uses a sample of Kolkata's Great Houses from the mid-eighteenth century to the early twentieth century to describe the architecture of the indigenous elite's, which were a response to the rise in British architecture in Kolkata.

6

THE GREAT HOUSES: A DESCRIPTION

The Great Houses of Kolkata were an amalgamation of traditional patterns of life and the indigenous elite's experiences during colonial rule. The great *zamindari* estates of Bengal and the British structures built in Kolkata during colonial times were certainly major influences on their designs. This chapter describes a number of rural estates and a selection of Kolkata's Great Houses (as listed in Chapter Three), to establish the ways in which the sprawling designs of rural estates found their way to north Kolkata and how the European structures built on Indian soil became models for the wealthy Bengali elites. Further, with these descriptions as a basis it will be possible to examine the ways in which the houses were built, which reflects the religious traditions and ways of life that affected their design.

Rural beginnings

'The Great Families and their houses in north Kolkata speak of a heritage that is 'clearly rooted in the soil' (Mullick, 2006).

The rural palaces described in this chapter include the Andul Palace, the Burdwan Palace, the Bansberia Palace, the Maheshadal Palace and the Somra Palace. Properties such as these were affected by the Permanent Settlement Bill which, as described earlier, paved the way for Kolkata's *banians* and merchants to become wealthy through the acquisition of land.

Many Great Families began as landowners or *zamindars* or were indirectly associated with *zamindari* backgrounds. These original owners of the land lived in sprawling palaces on rural estates so vast and so wealthy that they were ruled independently, and like the princes or maharajahs of the ruling class, had their own courts, tax collectors and police forces. Despite being mainly Hindu, their way of life and culture also owed much to Mughul, or nawabi society. Mughul society also played a part in the design

and formation of separate domains (such as the *zenana* or women's area) within the confines of the house itself.

Raja Nabakrishna's palace in north Kolkata is an example of this Mughul influenced sprawling style of grand house. Raja Nabakrishna's ancestors were associated with *zamindars* near Murshidabad and the Tagores of Jorosanko and Pathuriaghata were descendents of *zamindars* in Jessore and other rural areas around Kolkata so it is probable that Nabakrishna was influenced by the design of these estates. Even those who were not direct descendents of *zamindari* families and who became wealthy as *banians* would have had enough exposure to this sprawling design and rural aristocratic way of life in their villages to replicate it in the city once they had acquired enough wealth to do so. Lal Behai Day describes the house of a *zamindar as;* 'always the largest and the finest in a village, facing south to avoid the north wind in winter and catch the pleasant south wind in summer…' and further;

> The first courtyard of approximately 20 x 20 metres (60 x 60 square feet) would feature a large hall on the north side and on the west and east side, suites of small rooms extended from the hall and met the long high wall, in the middle of which was a gate. This part of the house was called the *Kachhari badi* (Cutcherry-house) where the *zamindar* would hold court and transact the affairs of his 65 *zamindaris.* The hall was covered with carpets, where the *zamindar* would sit, propped up on pillows while officials would squat at varying distances according to their rank.
> Beyond this hall, and to the north, another large courtyard held the spacious *dalan*, supported by arches, on two sides of which were covered verandahs, two stories high and consisting of several small rooms. This part of the house was called the *Bahir-badi* (outer-house) or the *Dalan-badi*. The *Dalan* was only used on great religious festivals when deity images were placed there, and dramatics and pantomimes were made in the open courtyard below, which was covered with a large cloth canopy, called a 'moonshade'. The courtyard of the *Dalan-badi* was connected to the hall of the *Kachchari-badi,* but the entrance used most was by a lane on the left of the hall. Beyond the *Dalan-badi* a third courtyard of exactly the same area featured a covered verandah on all sides, similar to the design of the *Dalan-badi*; two stories high, containing a large number of small rooms, with very few windows. This part of the house was the women's apartments, called the inner chamber, *andar-mahal*, or, the *zenana,* an area exclusively for the women of the house.

<div align="right">(Day 1920, p. 258)</div>

Day's description gives an indication of the size and design of a *zamindar's* house. Their imitation of the Mughul 'native princes' residences and way of life, displayed their aspirations to belong to the ruling class, or princely order. These imposing houses built by the landed class in Bengal symbolised their social status and the power they had acquired.

N.Mukherjee describes Jaykrishna Mukherjee, the *zamindar* of Uttarpara (1808-1888) as being a man who preferred to live a simple, even austere life, and yet his houses in Uttarpara (a rural area north of Kolkata) were known as the finest in the area, built on a large scale and in extensive grounds. Mukherjee suggests that some *zamindars* felt uneasy with their un-aristocratic social origins and so sought recognition by the building of lavish estates (Mukherjee 1975, p. 407). From the examination of rural estates for this study it seems that the building of large mansions and palaces with enormous halls, tall columns and impressive entrance gateways was characteristic of the landed classes in Bengal during the mid to late nineteenth century.

Though not complete (due to restrictions on access such as the privacy of elderly residents) there is adequate information and images to give an overview of the size, spatial qualities and the ways of life of a *zamindari* estate. The sample begins with the semi-urban area of Andul and then moves on to the more distant rural areas of Bansberia and Maheshadal.

The Andul Palace, Andul

The Andul Palace is located in Howrah on the west bank of the Hooghley. Raja Rajnarayan Bahadur built the palace in 1834, and according to family records the architects were from the firm of Granville Macleod. The firm was also involved in the design of the nawab's palace in Murshidabad, in 1837. Pradeep Mitra, an advocate of the High Court of India, his wife, daughter and an uncle are the only remaining members of the royal family of Andul who live in the one-hundred-room palace. They retain a few rooms in a remote wing while the rest of the palace is rented to various tenants including a sports club who use the palace land as a playing field. A triumphant gateway and high wall encloses the monumental facade of the Andul Palace (see Figures 6.1 and 6.2). The building displays strong European influences, with ten massive Doric style pillars of a 20 feet radius and over three stories high.

Though the palace is impressive it is plainly obvious it is also in extremely bad repair. Inside a decaying teak staircase leads to the Mitra's rooms, some of which have small overhanging wooden balcony overlooking a three storied courtyard featuring rows of Corinthian columns, now overgrown with ferns and weeds.

Figure 6.1. The Andul Palace (1834) in 2004.

Figure 6.2. *Left*, an entrance to the Andul Palace in 2004. 6.3. *Right*, the gateway and wall of the Andul Palace in 2004.
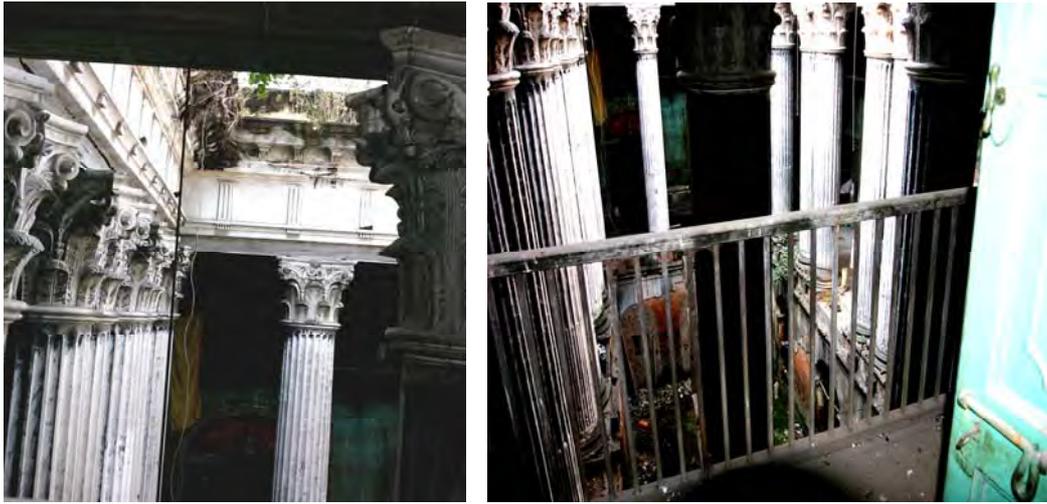
Figure 6.4. *left and right*. A courtyard of the Andul Palace in 2004.

European trade and commerce brought immense enrichment to families such as the Andul Raj, who profited from a European association. While some of these wealthy families moved to Kolkata, others stayed in their ancestral villages and integrated their family fortunes with the society of their villages. In this way many suburban families benefited from the residence of a Great Family. In fact, the first half of the nineteenth century was in many respects a flourishing period for suburban rural villages. Andul is a typical example of such a village. Today the palace is relatively forgotten and in poor condition (see Figures 6.5 and 6.6), but during British rule there were enough funds to maintain the palace well (interview, Mitra, 2005).
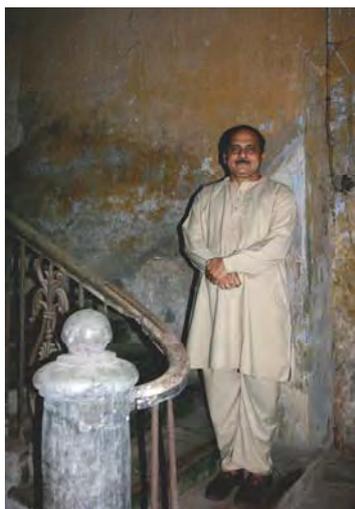
Figure 6.5. *Left*, Pradeep Mitra on the staircase of the Andul Palace in 2004. Figure 6.6. *Right*, Detail of the condition of the Andul Palace in 2004.

The Burdwan Estate, Burdwan

Claude Campbell dates the Burdwan Raj from the reign of Aurangzeb (1658 -1707), with titles and privileges bestowed by the Mughul emperors. The Burdwan Raj occupied a landed area of over 4,000 square miles [10,310 sq.kms] and was founded by British educated Abu Rai of Kotli, Lahore, who left the Punjab and settled in the district of Burdwan around 1657 (Campbell 1907, p. 46). The Maharajah of Burdwan occupied a position similar to a feudal prince right up to the early days of British rule in India, when he was still treated as a semi-independent 'native' ruler, with a prestigious social and political position, which included civil and military administration powers.

In its hey day, the Burdwan Raj owned properties which included the palace in Burdwan (the Mahtab Munzil), the palace in Kolkata (the Bijay Manzil), mansions in Burdwan (Dilram and the Dar-ul-Bahan), the Rajbati in Kalna, West Bengal, 'The Rosebank' in Darjeeling, 'The Retreat' in Kurseong and other residences in Varanasi, Kanpur, Cuttack and more (Campbell 1907, p. 46). In Burdwan town, in the district of Burdwan, the Maharajahs Chand Mahtab and Bijoy Chand Mahtab contributed to making the area culturally and economically stronger, including the setting up and the support of the Burdwan Raj College. When the estate was brought under the Permanent Settlement Bill the revenue paid to the Imperial treasury by the Burdwan estates was one of the largest in India and more than that paid by any other indigenous landowners in the Bengal presidencies (interview, Karuna Devi, 2004).

After Partition and Independence the government offered monetary compensation for the Burdwan estates. This sun however, was rejected as too little. Instead Maharajah Uday Chand Mahtab, the last representative of the Burdwan Raj, decided to leave almost the entire property in Burdwan at the disposal of the state government for the establishment of a university. Today the Rajbati, or palace of the maharajah, is utilised for the administration of the university while academic activities centre on the gardens and palaces of the maharajah known as the *golopbag*, or rose garden (see Figures 6.7 and 6.8), (interview, Princess Karuna Devi of the Burdwan Raj, 2004).

Figure 6.7. *Left and right*, the Maharajah of Burdwan's Palace in 2004.

Figure 6.8. *Left,* the entrance to the University of Burdwan in 2004. Figure 6.9. *Right*, the Burdwan coat of arms in 2004.

Figure 6.10. *Left*, a mansion, the former Burdwan estate in 2004. Figure 6.11. *Right*, the *Golabag*, or 'garden of roses', the former Burdwan estate in 2004.

The 'Garhbari', Bansberia

Raja Rameswar Deb Roy Mohashaya established a residence in the seventeenth century in Bansberia in the district of Hooghley. The date of 1670 is engraved on the entrance gate to the property however this date is more likely a reference to an older gateway, possibly the original, a few feet away and which is now in ruins (see Figures 6.12 and 6.13). The palace of the estate (*c*. early nineteenth century) and the deep moat and a high embankment that surrounds is known as the *Garhbari,* or 'moat house' (see Figure 6.14).

Figure 6.12. The original entrance gate, Bansberia (1670) in 2007.

Figure 6.13.The later entrance gate *c*. early to mid-nineteenth century, in 2007.

Figure 6.14. *Left and right*, views of the palace moat, in 2007.

As well as the moat, the palace is surrounded by a high wall and guardhouses at the front and rear with watchtowers fitted with canon. These fortifications were necessary to deter invaders in earlier times (see Figure 6.15). Raja Rameswar built a terracotta temple to Vasudeva in 1679, which still stands today (see Figure 6.16) and is famous for its murals In 1815 the famous Hangseshwari Temple (see Figure 6.17) was built in the *Ratha* or *Ratna* or pinnacled style, with six stories and thirteen turrets shaped like lotus buds. It is in this temple that the family's deity resides. Today, the palace is home to descendents Kanak Roy and his brother who live with just a few servants in leisured isolation.

Figure 6.15. *Left*, the Temple of Vasudeva in 2007. Figure 6.16. *Right*, the Hangseshwari Temple in 2007.

Figure 6.17. The 'Garhbari', in 2007.

The Palace of Maheshadal, Maheshadal

The Palace of Maheshadal is a fine example of the spaciousness of a rural estate, and the number and functions of the buildings within its confines. Descendents of this *zamindari* family believe their palace is the only <u>real</u> palace in Bengal (see Figures 6.18 and 6.19). The palace is certainly impressive, which is due in part to its tropical garden setting and that it is not surrounded by the urban sprawl or the build up of other dwellings, as is the case in north Kolkata.

Figure 6.18. The Maheshadal Palace (c. 1900) in 2007.

Figure 6.19. The entrance to the Palace of Maheshadal in 2007.

The hybrid architecture of the palace shows Classical and colonial features, and the influence of central Indian architecture in its design. (The family's ancestor Anandulal Upadhaya came from Uttar Pradesh and took the name Maheshadal from the name of the village). Multiple wide hallways and wide openings to covered verandahs feature throughout the palace, unlike the small, dark passageways of north Kolkata's mansions and palaces. There is an absence of shutters, instead fine fretwork is set into many of the window frames. The palace is light and airy, with a verandah for sitting outdoors. Inside the palace is decorated regally, velvet curtains, throne like chairs and ancestral paintings (see Figures 6.20, 6.21).
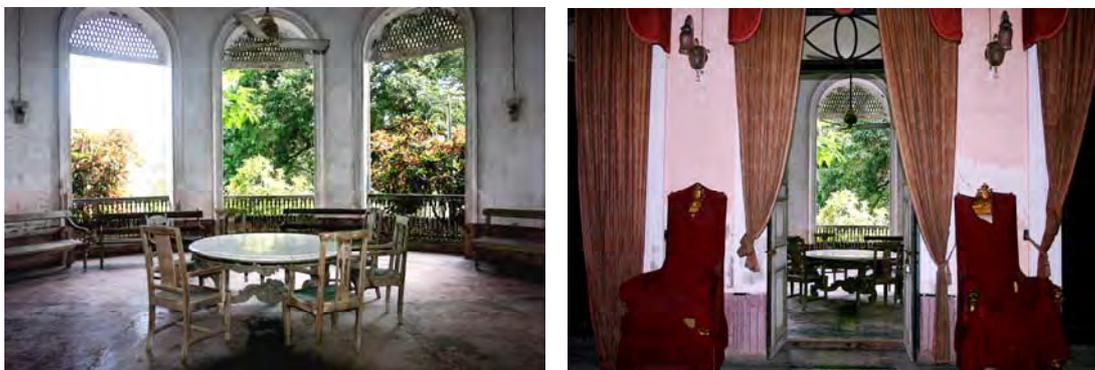
Figure 6.20. *Left*, the verandah of the Maheshadal Palace. Figure 6.21. *Right*, a reception room in the Maheshadal Palace in 2007.

Surprisingly, the palace was built as a guesthouse in 1900, overtaking the original palace of *c*.1857 in style size and grandeur (see Figure 6.23). As a guest house the palace does not include a *zenana*, nor does it include a courtyard, however, not all *zamindari* houses had courtyards as the large estates usually built their own temples nearby, where the deity could be worshipped by the family and the villagers. The deity of the Maheshadal family resides nearby in the beautiful Radhagobindo Temple (see Figure 6.22). It was the move to densely populated north Kolkata which developed the need for familial and religious privacy in the form of the courtyard. Like the palace at Bansberia, the Maheshadal Palace had fortifications and employed guards for security. There are a number of other mansions on the estate, including a pavilion-styled house for the Brahmin priests who looked after the religious requirements of the family and the temple (see Figures 6.24 and 6.25). Today the Maheshadal Palace is home to eighty-six year old Maharani Kaliyar Dala Devi, the only remaining family member on the large estate.
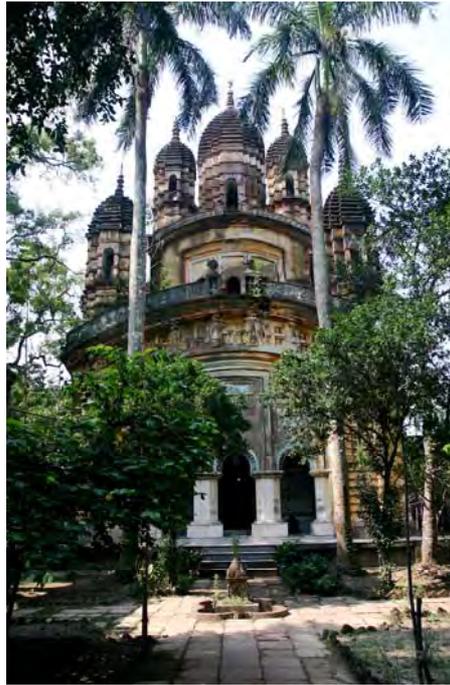
Figure 6.22. the Radhagobindo Temple in 2007.

Figure 6.23. The original Palace of Maheshadal, *c*. 1857, in 2007.

Figure 6.24. *Left*, a mansion, the Palace of Maheshadal in 2007. Figure 6.25. *Right*, housing for priests, the Palace of Maheshadal in 2007.

The Somra Palace, Somra

The Somra Palace, probably built in the early nineteenth century, is now in a severe state of disrepair. The family do not live in their ancestral home but do come together there a few times a year, particularly during the time of the *durga puja*. A few old people live in the dilapidated building, acting as caretakers, and there is a large tank and a beautiful terracotta temple diagonally opposite the building (see Figure 6.30).

The entrance to the double storied palace, partly overtaken by vegetation, features six Doric columns which form a shallow portico, rather in the style of a verandah. The columns and façade of the palace are simple and unadorned. Timber rafters over the entrance indicate a roof long since gone. The entrance is dark and tunnel-like, similar in style to most north Kolkata palaces, described in depth later in the study. Various storage rooms and offices run off the entrance before reaching an inner, grassy courtyard dominated by a raised *thakur dalan*[1] featuring five archways. The lower and upper levels of the courtyard feature Doric columns of the same style and size, indicating the house was built as a whole, not in varying stages, another indication of wealth. The columns of the upper level are interspersed by wrought iron railings and fixed wooden shutters above.

The courtyard is unusual as it has the addition of a delineated space within. This space is created by short pillars, possibly the Doric columns cut to size, linked by decorative wrought iron panels to make a smaller, square compound, with openings on the north and south sides. These pillars topped by curved metal hooks overhanging the inner space, possibly used to hang containers of flowers or cloth shading. Overall the decoration of the building is restrained, and in this way differs from the over decorated style of some north Kolkata's palaces. There was no pertinent history about the building or the family available for this study. The palace has been included as it is an example of the significant decline of many wealthy *zamindari* estates in West Bengal. In this case the pictures tell the story (see Figures 6.26, 6.27and 6.28, 6.29). The use of Classical facades in rural palaces, illuminated in this chapter, indicates the extent of the influence of British architecture and the ways in which European buildings in Kolkata became models for city and rural palaces alike.

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[1] The worship area, and site of the deity during religious festivals.

Figure 6.26. The Somra Palace in 2007.

Figure 6.27. *Left and right*, details of the entrance to the Somra Palace in 2007.

Figure 6.28. The courtyard of the Somra Palace in 2007.

The rural palaces of Bengal were the antecedents to Kolkata's Great Houses of the eighteenth century. Most rural estates were extensive and included a number of separate buildings. Family temples were usually separate to the palaces and used by the *zamindar's* family and the local villagers. In Kolkata, land size was often restricted, therefore the palaces of the city's wealthy merchants and *banians* incorporated worship areas, (namely the *thakur dalan)*within the confines of the house itself.

Many Great Families began as landowners or *zamindars* or were indirectly associated with *zamindari* backgrounds as mentioned earlier in this chapter. Plans of Kolkata's early urban palaces were designed to evoke feelings of 'home'. Links between rural and city palaces include the *zenana*, or women's area; the sprawling style, and their way of life and culture, all of which were influenced by earlier Mughul, or nawabi society.

Figure 6.29. The courtyard walls, the Somra Palace in 2007.

Figure 6.31. The Somra Kali Temple in 2007.

The Kolkata Great Houses

Rural *zamindars* built mansions and palaces in Kolkata as did the wealthy *banians* and rising merchant class as noted earlier in this chapter. This chapter describes a sample of these city residences to provide further evidence of the impact of British buildings on the Indian elites. The following is an extract of heritage residential houses from a 'first list' produced by the K.M.C., twelve of which were studied or referred to as part of the research for this thesis, and are in bold type. The houses chosen for study were because of their representative style, era and place as well as their information availability.

The List of Heritage Residential Houses Identified by the K.M.C.

House of the Basak family: Kalicharen Ghosh Road
House of the late Mr Manmatha Ganguly: 65 Banamali Chatterjee Street
Belgachia Villa: Khudiram Basu Sarani
Satkhira Rajbari (Roy Chowdhur family): Cossipore Road
Cossipore Udyan Bati: Cossipore Road
House of Girish Ghosh: Girish Avenue
House of Rashbehari Ghosh: 16 Parsi Bagan Lane
House of Saha Family 'Putul Bari': Harachand Mallick Street
House of Mitra Family 'Sovabazar Raj Bari': 34 Shampukur Street
House of Raja Nabakrishna Deb: Raja Nabakrishna Street
House of Sinha Family: 36 Nabakrishna Street
House of Dutta Family: 76 A Beadon Street
Basu Bidyan Mandir: A.P.C. Road
House of Laha Family: 223 Bidhan Sarani
House of Raja Kristo Dass Laha: 2 Bidan Sarani
House of B.K.Paul: 92 Sovabazar Street
House of Mukherjee Family: 13 Jorabagan Street
House of Maharaja Sukhmay Ray: 25 Maharsi Debendra Nath Tagore Street
The Prasad of Jotindra Mohan Tagore: 138 Prassana Kr. Tagore Street
Jorasanko Rajbari: 286 Rabindra Sarani
House of Raja Rammohan Roy: 85 Raja Rammohan Sarani
Thakur Bari: 6/4 Dwaraka Nath Tagore Lane
The 'Marble Palace': 46 Muktaram Babu Street
House of Raja Subodh Mullick: 12 Raja Subodh Mullick Square
House of Rani Rashmani Family
House of Sri Ashutosh Mukherjee: 77 Ashtosh Mukherjee Road
House of Chitta Ranjan Das: 7 Hazra Road
Bhukailash Rajbati: Bhukailash Road
The House of Ramdullah Deb
House of Rashbehari Ghosh: 16 Parsi Bagan Lane

The following table (Table 1) is a summary of the characteristics of the Great Houses selected from the list above and demonstrates the rise in British influenced architecture and decorative features on the style of the Great Houses over time. From the pre-British architecture of the Palace of Raja Nabakrishna to the Burdwan Palace of 1904, which discarded the traditional courtyard for ballrooms and European ways of life, these buildings exemplify the ways in which some indigenous elites accepted western culture and architecture, while on the other hand some retained their cultural and religious traditions.

Table 1.The selection of Great Houses used in this study

Building	Date	Design	Area	Religious Element	Condition	Residents
Raja Nabakrishna's Palace	1757	Sprawling Moghul, Hindu	North Kolkata	Courtyard *thakur dalan*	Poor	None
Laha Palace	1832	Sprawling	North Kolkata	Courtyard *Thakur dalan*	Well maintained	Laha family
Marble Palace	1835	European	North Kolkata	Courtyard	Maintained	Mullick family
The Jorosanko Palace	*c*. first half of 19th century	European and Hindu	North Kolkata	Courtyard, large *thakur dalan*	Reasonable	Roy family
The Mullick Palace, Jorosanko	*c*. first half of 19th century	European and Hindu	North Kolkata	Courtyard	Reasonable, though altered	Mullick family
The Basu Palace	1876	Hindu, Moghul, some European	North Kolkata	Courtyard, large *thakur dalan*	Poor	Basu family
The Guptoo mansion	Late 19th century	Rambling, Altered	Central Kolkata	Courtyard Apartment for deity	Maintained	Guptoo family
The Roy mansion	Late 19th century	Hybrid, Compact	North Kolkata	Courtyard	Well maintained	Roy family
Burdwan Palace	1904	European	South Kolkata	No courtyard	Good condition	One member, Burdwan family

It should be noted that some residences in the previous table are not on the list of the K.M.C. (i.e. the Basu Palace, the Guptoo mansion, the Burdwan Palace) as they either do not match the K.M.C.'s criteria or because the owners do not want the restrictions that result from heritage status. Other mansions are also covered in passing: the Khelet Bhavan (*c.*1856), the Great House of the Dutta family, the House of the Tagores' (1784), 'Yulebank', the home of the Jatri family, the Great Houses of Motilal Sil (c.1835) the Prasad, the home of Sandip Deb, the home of Raja Mookherjee, Narajol House, the Great House of the Mitters', the Belgachia Villa (1823), the Emerald Bower, the Great House of the Law family, the home of the Bose family, the Great House of Ramdulal Dey, Rajah's Garden in Cossipore and the home of Patha Ghose.

Raja Nabakrishna's Palace

The Great Houses built at the beginning of north Kolkata's building boom, which began in 1757, used sprawling designs similar to the large rural homes of the *zamindars.* Certainly the rural buildings were an influence on the architectural style of Raja Nabakrishna Deb's Palace in Shovabazar, Kolkata's earliest extant Great House. Nabakrishna (1733-97) is said to have been involved in diverse activities, from business as a broker, rendering political and legal service to the East India Company, drafting petitions, managing estates and acting as an interpreter of Arabic and Persian documents, all of which helped him financially and socially. Nabkrishna's title was bestowed on him in recognition of his services to the East India Company and his loyalty during the Battle of Plassey.[2] It is said the British also gave Nabakrishna vast areas of land in Shovabazar. Nabakrishna acquired the palace, formerly the home of Sobharam Ghosh, under the Sunset Law in 1757 and began intense alterations for the *Durga Puja* festival to celebrate Robert Clive's victory at Plassey. Robert Clive and Warren Hastings were both regular guests, especially Clive who had an advisor, confidante and tutor in Persian in Nabakrishna.

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[2] N.K.Sinha states that Nabakrishna's prefixed title was a Mughal award therefore it is likely he received more than one such award. Sinha, 1967, p.393
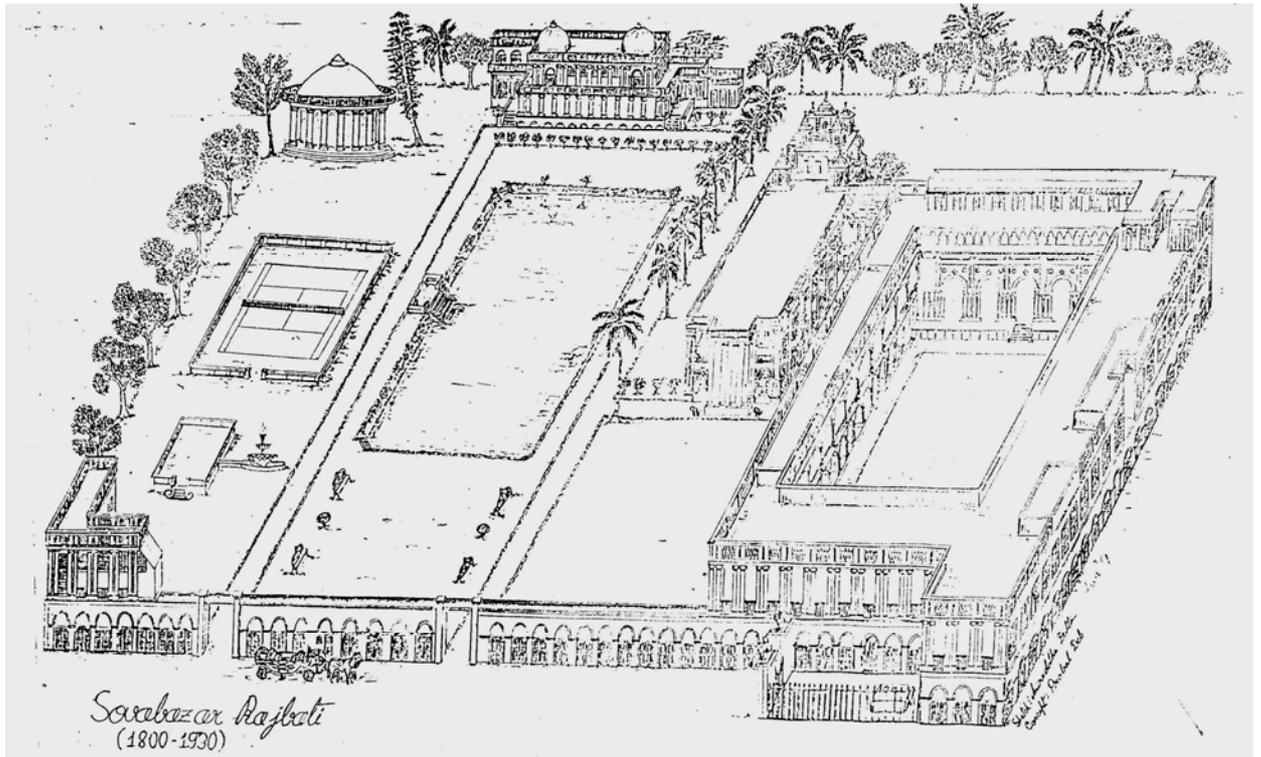
Figure 6.33. Conceptual image of the Palace of Raja Nabakrishna as it was between 1800 and 1930. Source, collection of Probal Deb, descendent of Raja Nabakrishna Deb.
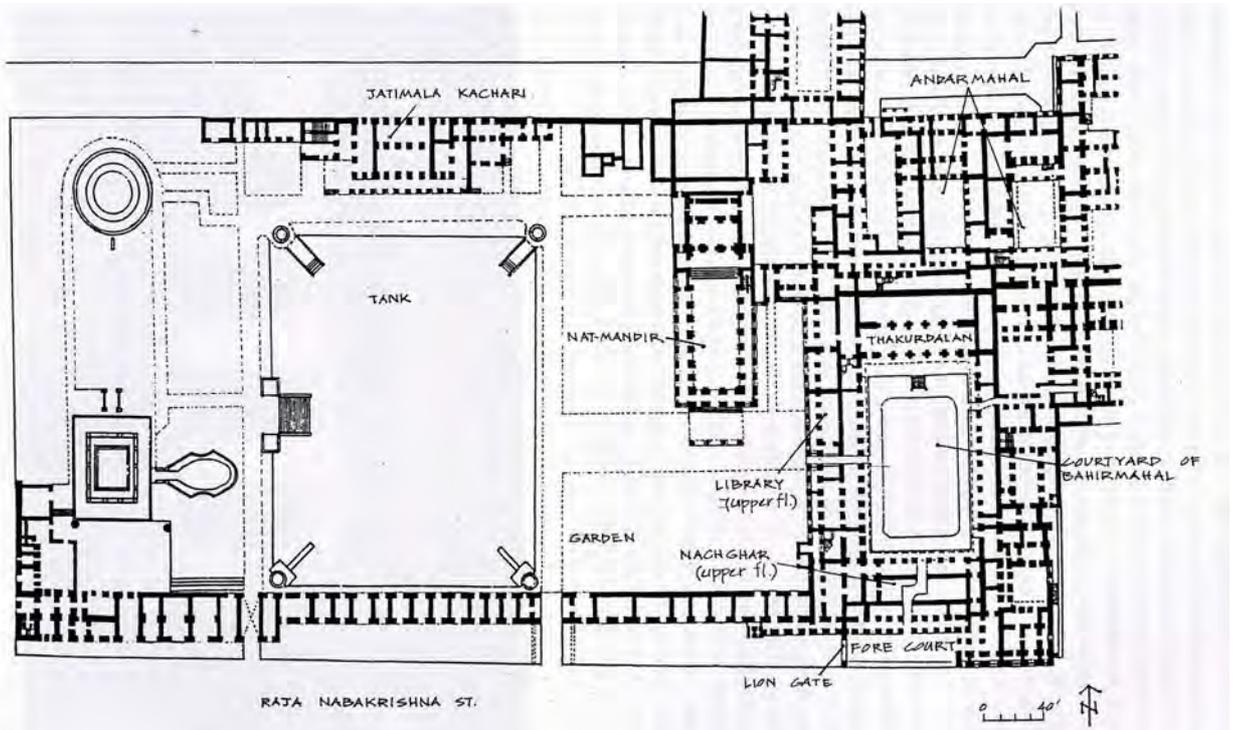
Figure 6.34. Drawing of the ground floor of Raja Nabakrishna's Palace, c. mid-nineteenth century. Source, Chattopadhyay 2005, p. 154.

From sketches and plans of the palace drawn in the mid-nineteenth century, it is evident there was once a large tank,[3] with steps on the west side of the property, a summer house, and a music pavilion set in extensive gardens with a series of small rooms on the north side connecting the residence with the garden, with a *jatimala kachari*, or office for meetings, on the north (see Figures 6.33, 6.34)[4]. The garden is now taken by the K.M.C. as a parking area for their vehicles.

The palace is entered via the 'Lion Gate' on Raja Nabakrishna Street in Shovabazar. It is probable that Nabakrishna's grandson, Raja Radhakanta Deb, added this gate and other European style features. They include the Palladian style twin Ionic columns supporting twin terracotta lions, a direct reference to the lions atop the entrance gates to the British style *Raj Bhavan* (Government House, 1803), the European style loggia beyond and the European style wrought iron lamps that line the main courtyard (see Figures 6.35, 6.36, 6.37, 6.38). Inside, the vast grassy public courtyard, 109 x 66 feet in size, with surrounding rooms, forms the *bahirmahal*, or 'outer house' (see Figure 6.39). These ground floor rooms surrounding courtyards were not usually important in most of Kolkata's Great Houses, particularly the exterior rooms that most often featured small windows and were invariably dark. These rooms were originally used to house servants, guests, priests and musicians, as well as storage places for religious items.

Figure 6.35. *Left.* The entrance gate of the Palace of Raja Nabakrishna in 2004. Figure 6.36. *Right*, the northern entrance gate to Government House.

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[3] 'Tank,' the name for a man made lake has Dutch origins.
[4] There are some differences between the representations of the palace in the two buildings but the essence is the same.

Figure 6.37. *Left*, the loggia at the entrance to the Palace, in 2004. Figure 6.38.*Right*, cast iron lamps in the courtyard in 2004.

Figure 6.39. The courtyard of the Palace of Raja Nabakrishna in 2004.

The south-facing *thakur dalan,* and north facing *nach ghar*, or dance room, are connected by double storied wings, forming the public courtyard (or *bahirmahal*). This is the first of the Great Houses to feature the double storied hollowed square design, and where the building departs from the traditional one story sprawling *mahals* of the rural *zamindari* estates. The raised *thakur dalan*, on the north side of the main courtyard, is reached by stairs, where, rather than the European balusters of many Great Houses built at later dates, six decorative arches rest on composite piers with groups of tapered shafts, topped by a decorative floral bouquet, found in Mughal and Bengali temple architecture (see Figure 6.40). A raised platform, *ro'ak*[5], partially

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[5] A raised space for sitting and chatting. Also used to describe a raised platform surrounding a courtyard.

covered by the second level, runs around the three sides of the courtyard, and is supported by large carved wooden beams (see Figure 6.41).

Figure 6.40. *Left*, the raised *thakur dalan*, the Palace of Raja Nabakrishna in 2006. Courtesy of A. Louth, 2006. Figure 6.41. *Right*, carved wooden beams, the Palace of Nabakrishna in 2004.

The gallery inside is traditionally Hindu in style. The *thakur dalan* has no European influences. Terracotta plaques of painted Hindu gods decorate the walls, some of which are reproductions (see Figures 6.42 and 6.43) (interview, Probal Deb, 2004). On the upper level a large room on the western side, some seventy feet long [21.36] once housed a famous library of Bengali literature, now long gone, and a fifty foot long [15.24 metres] dancing room on the south side (Probal Deb, 2004). The design of Nabakrishna's Palace, with its emphasis on the inner life of the house, particularly the inner courtyards, and the Mughal and medieval Bengali temple features, are typical of pre-colonial architecture. Though completely ruined in parts, the palace has had some restoration, though mainly in coats of paint.

Figure 6.42. Inside the *Thakur Dalan*, the Palace of Nabakrishna in 2004.

Figure 6.43. Wall plaque, the Palace of Nabakrishna in 2004.

Radhakanta Deb, Nabakrishna's grandson, added an impressive *natmandir*, or temple of performance, to the grounds of the palace in 1840. This building features a neo-Classical façade with Palladian style columns and a carriage port, which were all usual for the period (see Figure 6.44). The roof above the interior space for the deity however features Hindu temple architecture, or *navaratna*[6] which symbolised wealth and piety (Chattopadhyay 2006, p. 158), (see Figure 6.45 and 6.46). As the colonial government denied the indigenous elites the right to be involved in politics, social and cultural activities were vigorously pursued instead. The choice of both traditional and Classical architecture for the exterior, seen in Figures 6.47 and 6.48, was a clear statement of Radhakanta's position as a leading social and figure in colonial Kolkata.

Figure 6.44. The exterior of the *natmandir* in 2004.

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[6] *Navaratna* refers to the nine gemstones related to the nine planets used in Vedic astrology. Nava means 'nine' and ratna means 'gem' in the Sanskrit language.
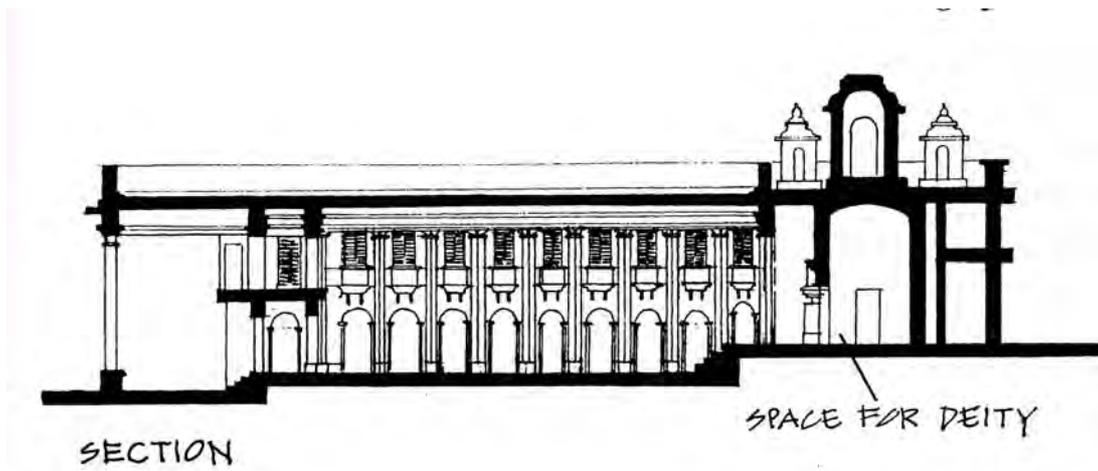
Figure 6.45. A side elevation of the *natmandir*, the Palace of Nabakrishna. Source, Chattopadhyay 2005, p. 159.

Figure 6.46. A photograph of the *natmandir* published in 1901. Source, Battacharyya, 2002, p. 328.

Figure 6.47. *Left,* the carriage port of the *natmandir*, the Palace of Nabakrishna in 2004. Figure 6.48. *Right*, a pinnacle atop the *natmandir*, the Palace of Nabakrishna in 2004.

The interior of the *natmandir* rejects the open courtyard for a large covered, enclosed space, more like a public hall. Twin staircases beside the deity's space lead to upper level balconies in the style of a theatre. These deviations changed Radhakanta's *natmandir* from a temple structure used for religious gatherings where musicians and dancers would perform, to a more classical, secular space, in other words, as a platform to demonstrate Radhakanta's position in Kolkata's colonial society (see Figures 6.49, 6.50, 6.51). Like Nabakrishna, Radakanta held suppers, balls and entertainments where both Bengali elites and European guests were invited.

Figure 6.49. The interior of the *natmandir,* the Palace of Raja Nabakrishna in 2004.

Figure 6.50. The interior of the *natmandir* from the *thakur dalan*, the Palace of Nabakrishna in 2004.
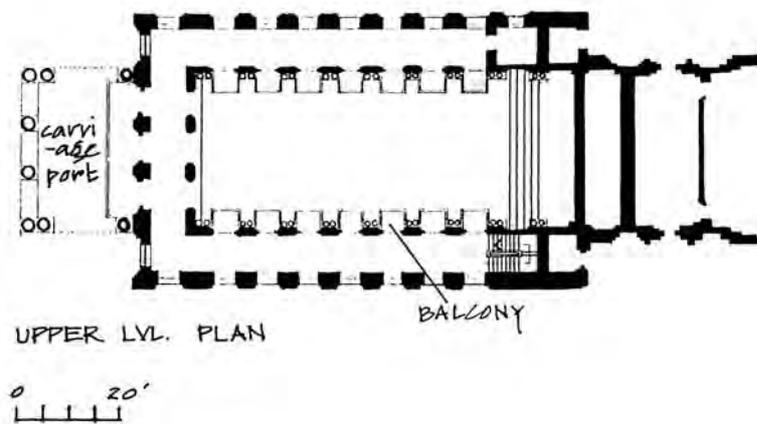
Figure 6.51. A plan of the *natmandir.* Source, Chattopadhyay, 2005, p. 159.

Nabakrishna built a large number of houses, on both sides of the street, and over the years these buildings were extended and altered to accommodate growing families and the architectural style of the day. His adopted son, Gopimohan, inherited the buildings on the northern side of the street and his younger son Rajkrishna inherited the buildings on the southern side. The growth of the family over the following century made the area of Shovabazar (see Figure 6.52) the centre of indigenous high society in North Kolkata (Chattopadhyay 2005, p 154).
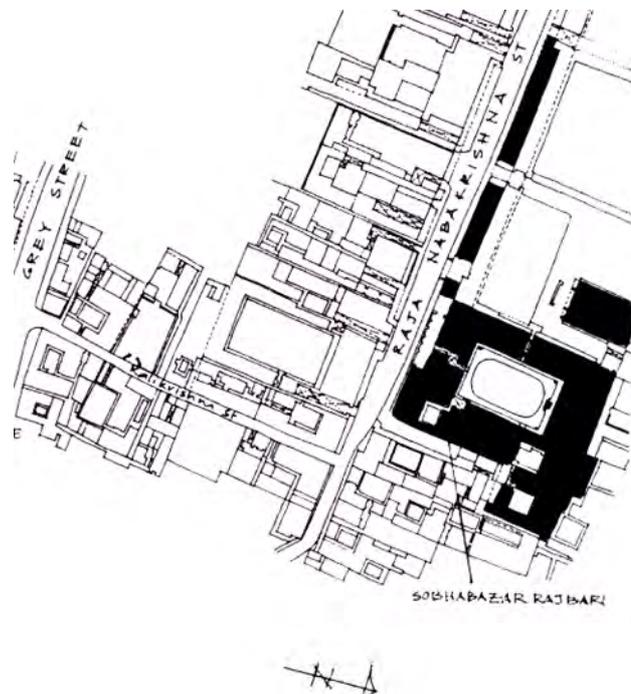
Figure 6.52. A street plan of the neighborhood of Shovabazar showing Raja Nabakrishna's Palace. Based on R.B. Smart's *Survey of Calcutta*, 1887 – 1909. Source, Chattopadhyay 2005, p. 203.

The Palace is an example of the sprawling style of the Great Houses of the eighteenth century. The Laha Palace, of the early nineteenth century, and in better condition, can also be described as adhering to a sprawling design plan.

The Laha Palace

One of the best preserved of Kolkata's Great Houses is the home of the Laha family on Bidhan Sarani Street (see Figure 6.53). The house, known locally as the 'Laha *Bari*', was built in 1832, and is one of four Laha mansions in the area of the Thanthania Kali Temple. The building's façade features shutters set inside curved window arches and a decorative cantilevered balcony and entrance portico which opens to an impressive double staircase (see Figures 6.54.6.55, 6.56).

Figure 6.53. *Left*, the entrance to the Laha *Bari* in 2004. Figure 6.54. *Right*, two Laha mansions in 2004.
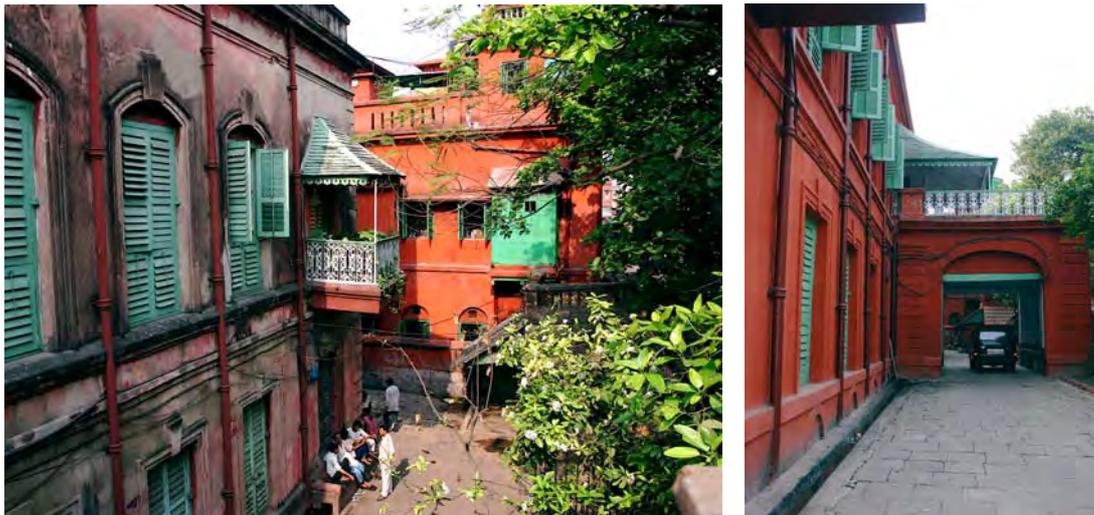
Figure 6.55. *Left,* two houses of the Laha family in 2004. Figure 6.56. *Right*, the portico of the Laha *Bari* in 2004.

The monumental main courtyard is reached by rambling passageways and halls on different levels (see Figure 6.57 and 6.58). Verandahs face inwards to the dramatic black and white painted courtyard which features decorative stencilling on the walls and columns. Groups of multiple columns, similar to the later *natmandir* of Raja Radhakanta's (1840) comprise the archways to the *thakur dalan* (see Figure 6.59). Four Laha families live in two houses next to each other. The oldest, according to the family, is approximately three hundred years old (see Figure 6.60). The family continues the tradition of entertaining lavishly in the courtyard during the *durga puja* festival (interview, Aloke Laha, 2004).

Figure 6.57. *Left*, the double staircase of the Laha *Bari* in 2004. Figure 6.58. *Right*, interior of the Laha *Bari* in 2004.

Figure 6.59. Aloke Laha in the courtyard of the Laha Bari in 2004.

Figure 6.60. The Laha family's 'new' home on the left and the 300 year old home on the right, in 2004.

The Laha family's Great House is a well maintained family home, in contrast to the Mullick's Marble Palace, which was built specifically as a museum to house the family's collection of art and sculpture as much as being a home.

The Marble Palace

The Marble Palace (see Figure 6.61) is the most famous of Kolkata's Great Houses and was given the name for the extent and variety of Italian marble covering its floors. Its vast grounds and gardens demonstrate British colonial ideas of spatiality (see Figure 6.62). Built in 1835 by Raja Rajendra Nath Mullick Bahadur, it is a monumental composite of Classical styles located incongruously in narrow Mukhteram Babu Street. Earlier Great Houses were designed on one level with several courtyards, but later buildings like the Marble Palace were multi storied with just one main courtyard. The Marble Palace dominates the area with its verticality rather than the earlier sprawling style of north Kolkata (see Figure 6.63).When Kolkata's wealthy merchants desired a wholly European mansion or palace they would employ an architect from firms like Macintosh Burn,[7] or an Indian engineer employed by the British East India Company. In the case of the Marble Palace, the

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[7] The architectural firm of Macintosh Burn was established in Kolkata in1834 (Bhattacharyya, 2002, p.160).

Mullick family believe a French architect was also employed (interview, Hirendro Mullick, 2005). Like most Great Houses there is little documentation on the architects who built them.

Figure 6.61. The Marble Palace in 2006.
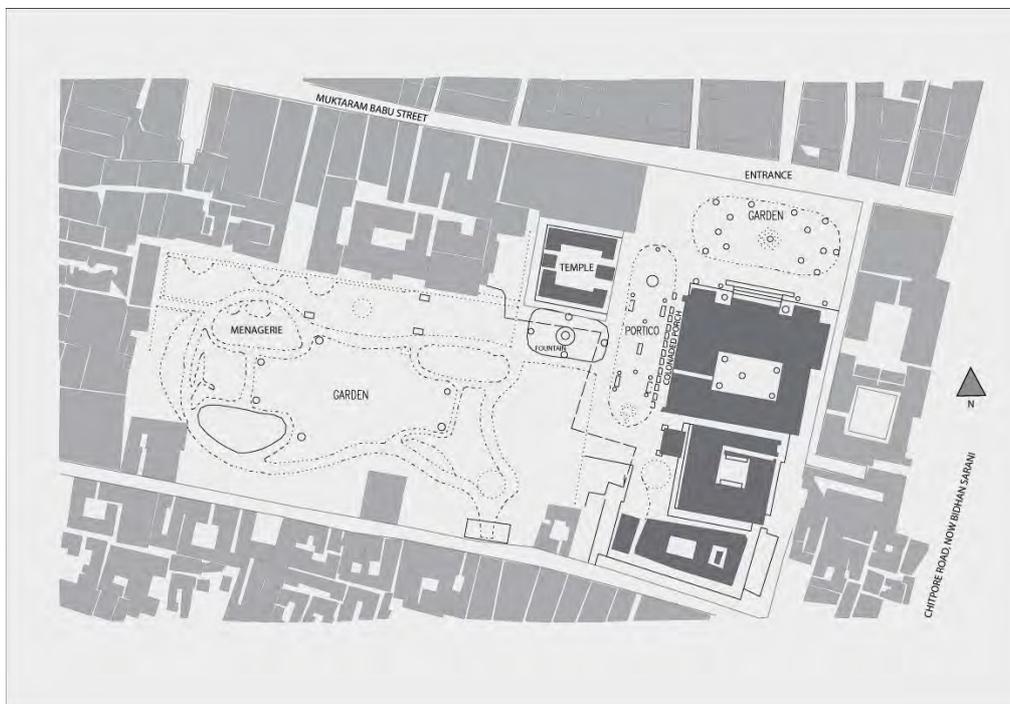
Drawing by Furio Vallich of Gordon and Vallich, Architects.

Figure 6.62. A drawing highlighting the Marble Palace and gardens. Source, K.M.C.

The building and grounds cover approximately 6.4 acres [2.5 hectares]. Tall palms flank the entrance gate and inside, the garden is dotted with marble fountains and an eclectic mix of statues which include lions, Hindu gods, the Buddha, Christopher Columbus, Jesus and the Virgin. In the grounds are the remains of a zoo and an ornamental lake featuring a fountain adorned with statues of Greek gods, including Neptune, with trident, fish and mermaids.
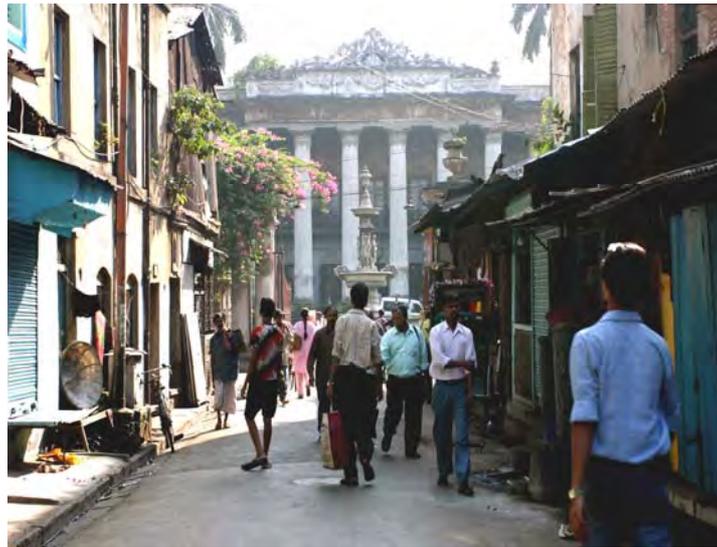
Figure 6.63. The Marble Palace in 2005.

An oval shaped driveway leads to a colonnaded portico supported by six classical columns topped by an ornate stucco pediment. Arcaded side bays feature ornate cast iron balconies (see Figure 6.64). Square pilasters with foliated capitals and projected cornices on the first floor and top floor level connect the ground floor and upper floors.

Figure 6.64. Side bays of the Marble Palace, in 2006.

The courtyard (see Figure 6.65), approximately 24 metres long by 14 metres wide, is positioned east to west as opposed to the traditional north to south courtyard. This deviation, as the family understand, was because the original building plan had to be reorientated after the family failed to achieve a frontage on Chitpore Road (Choudhury 1990, p. 171).

The *thakur dalan* sits on a low platform rather than ascending steps and is decorated in ornate floral blue and white stuccowork in the Victorian style and is decorated with western style sculptures, rather than the usual Hindu religious decorations. In earlier times the courtyard contained peacocks, parrots and a rare collection of monkeys (Campbell 1907, p. 253). Classic urns filled with palms and English garden seats make the space more suited to a European gathering than a traditional *durga puja* ceremony, and this switch from tradition became more obvious as the nineteenth century progressed. A large statue of Queen Victoria and the inclusion of an enormous 'billiard chamber' is the final testament to the influence of European style, taste and, at least, political acumen.

Figure 6.65. The courtyard and *thakur dalan* of the Marble Palace.
Source, Tadgell 1990.

The interior walls of the palace are decorated in an ornate Rococo style stuccowork (see Figure 6.66) and adorned with floor to ceiling Venetian mirrors which reflect a dusty light filtering through the shuttered windows. Dozens of Belgian chandeliers and oversized carved furniture all add to an atmosphere of grandeur (see Figure 6.67). The family are certain the palace was built for the purpose of displaying the family's huge collection of artefacts from around the world, a mix of the purely decorative to the rare and valuable. The collection is so vast that verandahs overflow with decorative objects.

Figure 6.66. The 'billiard chamber' of the Marble Palace in 2005.

Figure 6.67. Interior furnishings of the Marble Palace. Source, Moore, 1997, illustration 3.

The side elevation of the Marble palace features a colonnaded portico of fourteen columns, with the same number and style on the upper level. Both levels feature shutters. Overall traditional Hindu elements in the design of the Marble Palace are minimal (see Figures 6.68, 6.69).

Figure 6.68. The western façade of the Marble Palace in 2005.

Figure 6.69. The Marble Palace in it's hey day. Source, Campbell 1907, p. 253.

In contrast to the Marble Palace, the site of the Great House of the Roy family is on the city's famous Chitpore Road (now Rabindra Sarani) in Jorosanko, north Kolkata. The central courtyard runs in the traditional north to south direction.

The Jorosanko Palace

The now diminished grounds of the Great House of the Roy's of Jorosanko (known as the Jorosanko *Rajbari*) (see Figure 6.70) are entered through a grand gateway of carved stone in a high iron fence. The house itself and the main courtyard are entered via the south side of the building through a dark, narrow arcade lined with raised sitting spaces, or *ro'aks* (see Figures 6.71). Inside, a raised platform forms the base for pairs of enormous columns that surround the courtyard. Small rooms run off the courtyard and are used as offices for members of the family and store rooms. The *thakur dalan* is impressive as it is set above the courtyard and reached by ascending ten steps. Five archways form entrances to the worship space, above which are European style medallions painted with images of Hindu gods and goddesses (see Figures 6.72, 6.73, 6.74, 6.75). Figure 6.74 shows a drawing of the building and surrounding gardens.

Figure 6.70. The façade and entrance to the Jorosanko *Rajbari* in 2004.
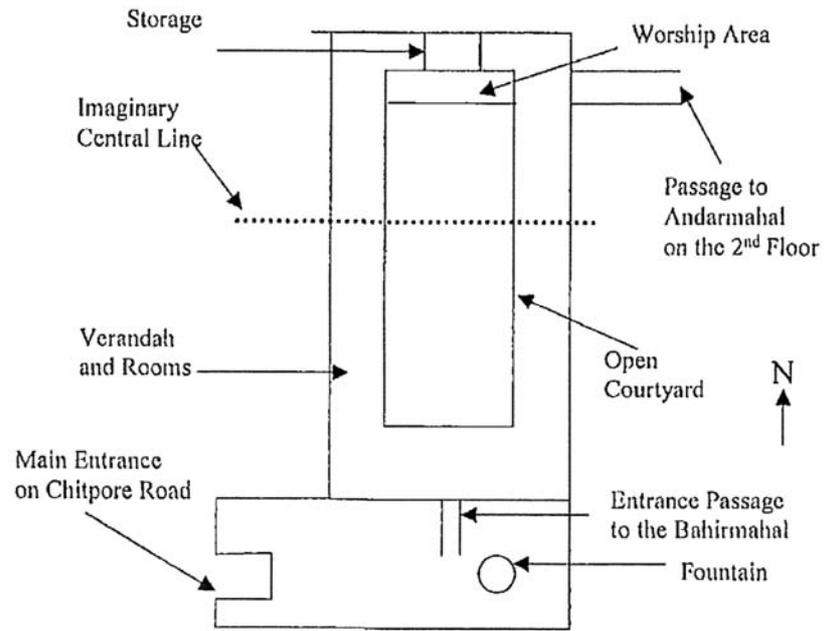
Figure 6.71. Plan of the Jorosanko *Rajbari*. Source, Bhattacharyya 2002, p.312.

Figure 6.72. The courtyard of the Jorosanko *Rajbari* in 2004.

Figure 6.73. Inside the *thakur dalan* of the Jorosanko *Rajbari* in 2004.

6.74. *Right*, the courtyard of the Jorosanko *Rajbari* in 2004.

Figure 6.75. The courtyard of the Jorosanko *Rajbari* in 2004.
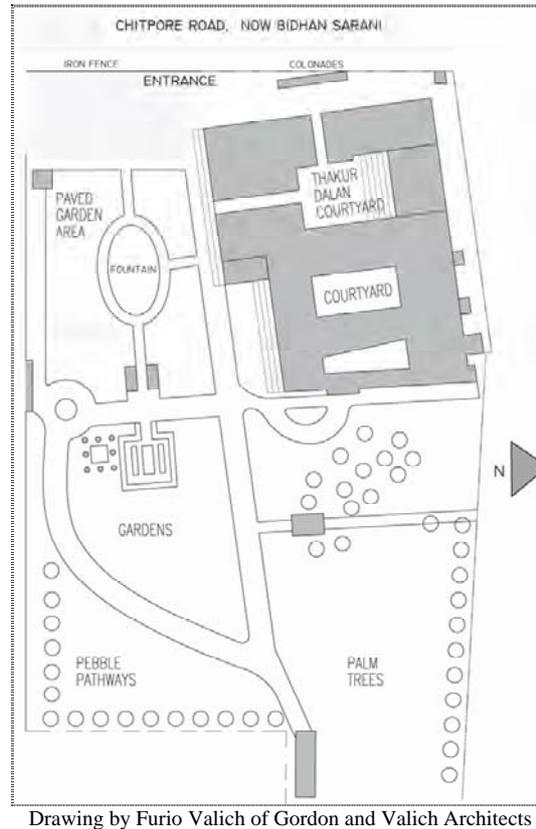
Figure 6.76. Drawing of the Jorosanko Raj *Bari*. It should be noted that the spelling of Chitpore and Chitpur are both correct.
Original Source, Kolkata Municipal Corporation.

Almost opposite the Jorosanko *Rajbari* is the Great House of Raja Subodh Mullick, which is known locally as the '*Ghariwallah',* or 'clock house,' for the Cooke and Kelvey[8] clock which sits atop its pediment. Like the Jorosanko *Rajbari*, the entrance is not on the street, but hidden on the northern side of the building, with the façade solely for display.

The Mullick's Jorosanko Palace

The grand façades of the Jorosanko Rajbari and the *Ghariwallah* (see Figure 6.77) both face the street, revealing the public face of the Great Houses while the private face, their entrances and traditional spaces, remain hidden (see Figures 6.78). Complicated and often tortuous entrances are common in many of Kolkata's vast courtyard houses. These secluded entrances could be closed quickly and easily for

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[8] Cooke and Kelvey were jewellers on Old Courthouse Street. The shop now sells white goods (Das, 2007, p.151).

security and were designed to deter to *dacoits* (robbers) who would have difficulty in entering, and also in safely securing the women of the *zenana*. In addition, they created a damp, shaded area in even the hottest weather.

The three level building has been radically divided internally and externally to meet the demands of a large family. Part of the house on the street frontage is now a pharmacy and a small cake shop run by a family members. The result of these changes is that little is original however the furnishings inside the house and on the verandahs are testimony to an earlier prosperity and a more gracious way of life (see Figure 6.79, 6.80, 6.81).

Figure 6.77. The Great House of the Mullick family of Jorosanko, in 2004.

Figure 6.78. The secluded entrance to the Ghariwallah, in 2007.

Figure 6.79. *Left*, the courtyard of the Mullick house, in 2007. Figure 6.80. *Right*, a verandah in the Mullick house.

Figure 6.81. A bedroom in the Mullick house in 2007.

The Mullick house in Jorosanko, retains enough artefacts and furnishings to remind visitors of its grand past, however, in the Great House of the Basu family there is very little that remains of the home's former glory.

The Basu Palace

The Great House known as the Basu *Bari* is located in Bagbazar that was considered to be an exclusive area of north Kolkata during colonial times. The estate covered an area of fourteen acres (5.6 hectares) and extended up to Maratha Ditch Lane (now Acharya Prafulla Chandra and Jagadish Chandra Bose Roads). It included a large garden, stables and a zoo, or menagerie, of exotic animals, but after years of division

and subdivision the property has been drastically reduced. Small hutments, a paper shop, a restaurant and a school have grown up around the building, and with these encroachments the Basu *Bari* is now reached via a narrow lane rather than its original imposing entrance on Bagbazar Street (see Figures 6.82 and 6.83). Bengali engineer Nilmony Mitra built the Great House in 1876. As mentioned previously in this study, Mitra graduated from Roorki in 1851 and built a number of large mansions, however, the Basu *Bari*'s interesting façade and decorative features deviate from other Great Houses.

Figure 6.82. The lane leading to the Basu *Bari* in 2004.

Figure 6.83. The Basu *Bari* at the lane's end, in 2004.

Most buildings belonging to affluent Bengalis in north Kolkata had favoured European designs therefore the style of the Basu *Bari* is noteworthy. Although it follows the classical model with its elaborate façade and impressive columns, engineer Nilmony Mitra seemed more inspired by traditional Indian designs in detailing.

Even though what is reputedly an original photograph taken by the architect has faded, the grand south facing façade of the palace remains clear.[9] (see Figures 6.84 and plans 6.85, 6.86). Sixteen monumental decorative columns each topped by cast iron brackets and lined with brick strengthen the southern corridor of the house. The decorative railings are cast iron. The columns differ from the usual Doric or Corinthian columns as they are topped with a pattern of large lotus leaves rather than scrolls or Victorian floral motifs. Below twelve lions heads in relief encircle each column and each lion's head is connected by double rows of beads shaped in stucco.
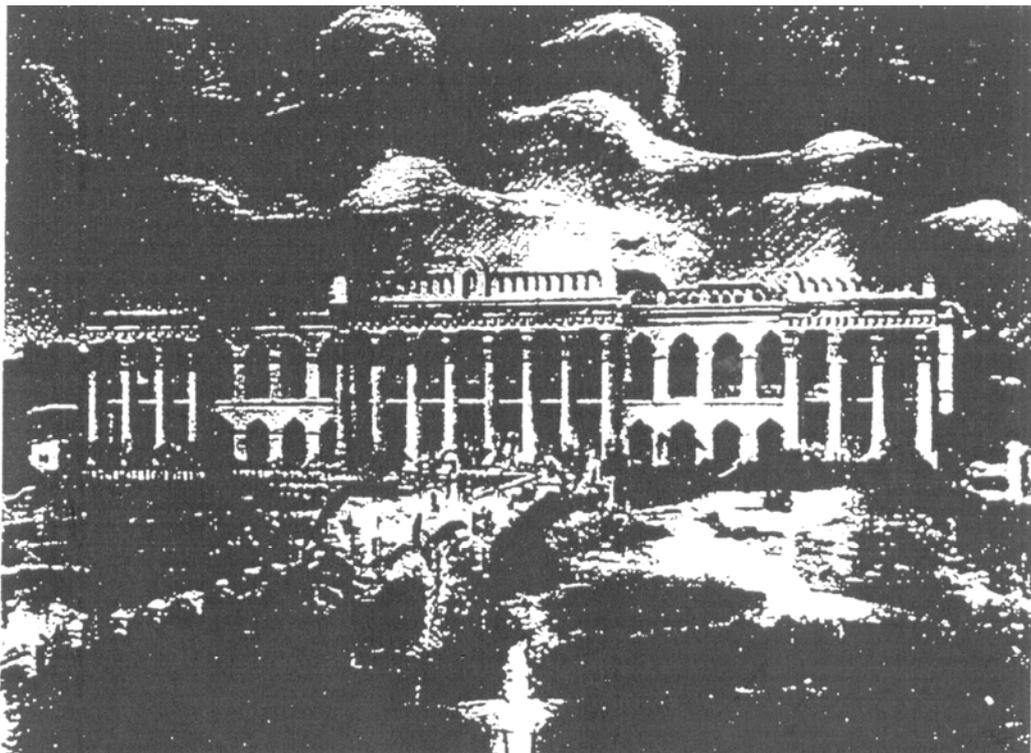
Figure 6.84. Image of the original façade of the Basu *Bari*, 1876. Source, Bhattacharyya 2002, p. 223.

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[9] The condition of the image makes it difficult to interpret. By taking in the unnatural cloud pattern the author suggests it is most likely a photograph of a painting.

It is important to note that the following two plans should be read separately. Figure 6.85, a plan of the Basu *Bari*, is included to show the number of rooms and the situation of the outer house (*baithakana*) and the inner house (*andarmahal*). Figure 6.86, a site plan of the building, is included as it places the 'new house', the lane and the gardens around the building and clearly shows the inner courtyards.
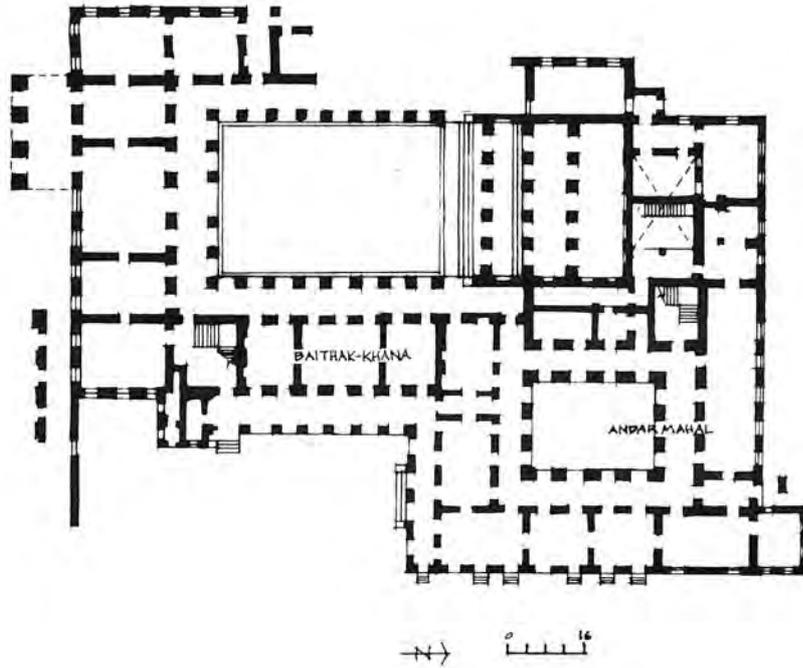
Figure 6.85. Plan of the Basu *Bari*. Source, Chattopadhyay, 2005, p.271
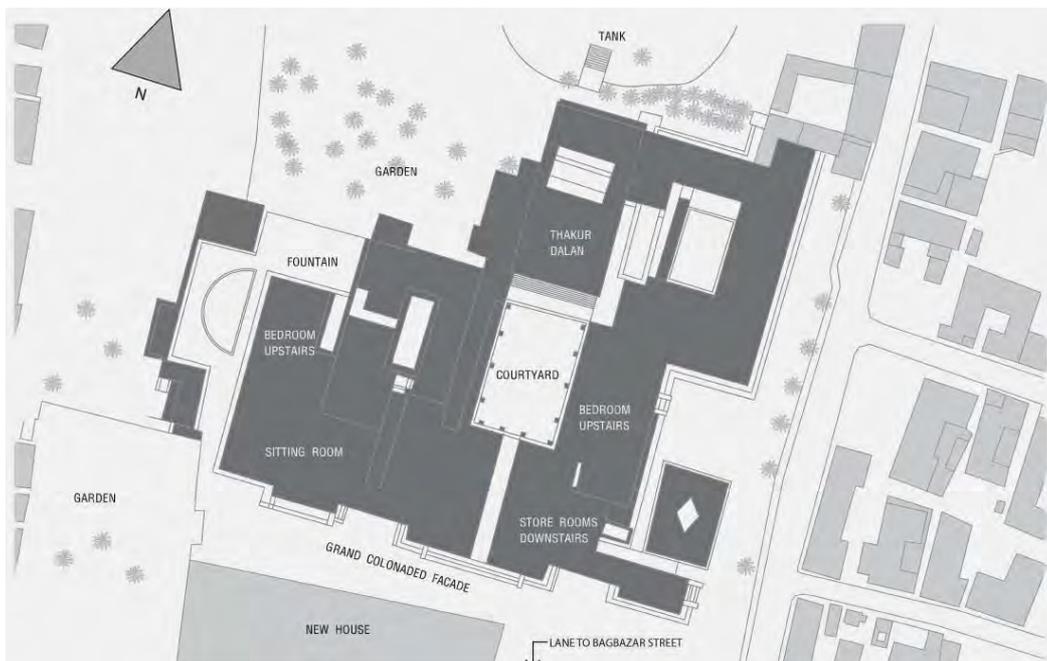
Drawing by Furio Valich of Gordon and Valich architects

Figure 6.86. The site plan of the Basu *Bari*. Source, K.M.C.

The non-European elements of the Basu *Bari* are best seen in the façade's parapet and the courtyard. Though the 'idea' of the European 'grand façade' is evident, the pillars on the left of the Basu *Bari* are shaped more like Hindu temple pillars rather than Classical columns. On the right, the entrance to the palace features Islamic archways (see Figure 6.87) which open into a number of small, dark rooms. This motif is carried through to the windows (see Figure 6.88). As is the case with most Great Houses, these rooms were either used for storage or as servant's quarters. In stark contrast, the courtyard is a vast, light filled impressive space with a dramatic *thakur dalan* as the focal point. The tall pillars of the courtyard with their decorative inverted capitals and lotus motif are again, inspired by both Bengali temples and the British buildings of colonial Kolkata (see Figure 6.89).

Figures 6.87. The entrance to the Basu *Bari* in 2004.

Figures 6.88. The upper level of the façade of the Basu Bari in 2004.

The pillars on the sides of the courtyard's lower level feature octagonal columns with inverted capitals similar to the exterior, which support the upper level. Columns of the same style support the roof however their ornamentation is different, suggesting that, like some Great Houses in north Kolkata, the Basu *Bari* was perhaps built over a period of time. The *thakur dalan* at the northern end of the courtyard is reached by ascending stairs where six colossal fluted pillars introduce the worship platform and support the roof and parapet. Beyond, five intricate archways in ancient Bengali temple style form a line, through which the dark, cavernous interior of the worship area is reached (see Figure 6.90). Though it is poorly maintained, and much of the structure is now bare stonework, faint traces of the original turquoise and amber coloured murals depicting Hindu gods can still be seen (see Figure 6.91).

Figure 6.89. The courtyard of the Basu Bari in 2004.

Figure 6.90. Inside the *thakur dalan* in 2004.

Figures 6.91. *Left* and *right*, murals in the *thakur dalan* of the Basu *Bari* in 2004.

Brothers Nandalal and Pasupati Basu began building the Basu *Bari* when they inherited a large part of the enormous *zamindari* estate of Goya in 1874. According to the Basu family, the foundation stone was laid in October 1876 and the family began residing there two years later. They led a typical *babu* lifestyle in north Kolkata yet also upheld traditional religious conventions. Well-known spiritual figures visited the palace, including Ramakrishna, and some remaining religious motifs such as images of Hindu gods and goddesses in the Kalighat style can be seen in the French doors leading to the sitting room. The family also became involved in the growing freedom movement and political leaders visited the palace, including Surendra Nath Banerji, who gave lectures in front of the *thakur dalan,* and held a meeting on the lawn during the partition of Bengal Movement. Amit Basu recalls many grand political functions in the palace in the early twentieth century, describing his great grandfather, a member of the Congress Party, as a 'freedom fighter.' Basu feels his ancestor's anti-British sentiments meant he was never considered for the title of rajah, a title Amit feels he would have refused (interview Basu, 2004).

Very little remains of the original interior decoration of the palace, however, the Basus keep a decorated sitting room on the ground floor for visitors (see Figure 6.92). Many artefacts have been donated to the government in the hope they will be restored, something that is difficult for many old families to achieve with their own funds. In it's hey day, the Basu *Bari* was heavily decorated, with gold ceilings in the reception

rooms, marble statues, chandeliers and a dance room on the first floor with a stage, rows of chairs for guests, and a balcony for the ladies of the house to watch performances.

Today the only accessible area of the Basu *Bari* is the *bahirmahal.* This includes the courtyard and the sitting room. This is the only original part of the house. A branch of the family lives on the upper level, and has altered it for their living requirements. Other parts of the house have been locked up due to family disputes. A number of Kolkata's Great Families have found ways in which to maintain their ancestral homes, however, despite their obvious pride in their unique ancestral home the Basus have found their home impossible to maintain, consequently part of the house has been sold to the K.M.C. Today, Amit Basu, his wife Sonali and their two children live in a 'new' house built some thirty-five years ago by Amit's father (see Figure 6.93).

Figure 6.92. The sitting room of the Basu Bari in 2004.

Figure 6.93.The sitting room of the 'new' Basu house in 2004.

For many reasons the Basu *Bari* is an example of the decline of both north Kolkata's Great Houses and the extended Bengali family. The mansion of the Guptoo family, despite alterations and severely diminished land, manages to remain home to the extended Guptoo family.

The Guptoo mansion

The rambling Guptoo mansion is situated on Middleton Road in the commercial area of Kolkata. Built in approximately the mid-nineteenth century, the home has been swallowed up by surrounding buildings making the home invisible. The Guptoo mansion is included in this study to demonstrate how a Great Family's religious observances dictate the form of a Great House. The Guptoo home is analysed in Chapter Seven. The following palace, the home of the wealthy Burdwan family, is on Diamond Harbour Road, south Kolkata. Built in the early twentieth century, it differs in many significant ways to Kolkata's Great Houses of earlier periods.

The Burdwan Palace

The Burdwan Palace in Kolkata's south was built by Mackintosh Burn and Company as the residence of the Maharajadhirajas of Burdwan (see Figure 6.94). The building is not on Intach's list of heritage sites. A spokesperson for Intach, Ninima Debla, feels the palace is 'a bit of a miss mash' (interview, Ninima Debla of Intach, 2005). Certainly the building deviates significantly from most Great Houses of north Kolkata, but most of the houses on the list are also hybrid in style and design. For this study the Burdwan Palace is included as it is valuable in determining the extent

Kolkata's wealthy indigenous elites were influenced by British architecture and ways of life during colonial times.

The exterior of the palace features Corinthian columns which support a large portico, above which is a terrace surrounded by decorative cast iron railings and a neo-classical pediment displaying the Burdwan coat of arms.

Figure 6.94. The Burdwan Palace in 2004.

The second level, with eight purely decorative columns and arched windows and doors, extends from the main house, creating an interior entrance hall with grand staircases at each end (see Figures 6.95 and 6.96). The once spacious gardens at the rear of the palace are now diminished by the selling of land to developers (see Figure 6.97) and the stables and servant quarters are empty. 'At one time there were carriage horses, riding ponies and polo ponies, about sixty in all, and fifty servants and fifteen gardeners employed on the estate' (interview, Karuna Devi, 2004).

Figure 6.95. *Left*, the entrance to the Burdwan Palace in 2004. Figure 6.96. *Right*, the entrance hall and staircase, the Burdwan Palace in 2004.

Figure 6.97. The rear of the Burdwan Palace facing the tank, in 2004.

Despite the Burdwan family's long history and traditions and their pre-British titles the design of the palace does not include a traditional courtyard or *thakur dalan*. Instead the Burdwan Palace replaces the Hindu elements with European style reception rooms; cocktail rooms, dining rooms and a ballroom (see Figures 6.98 and 6.99).

Figure 6.98. The interior of the Burdwan Palace in 1977. Source, Moore 1997, illustration 50.

Figure 6.99. The interior seen in Figure 6.99 above, in 2005.

By 1904, the building date of the Burdwan Palace, British style was firmly established in the homes of wealthy Indians in Kolkata. The Burdwan family were exposed to all things European through their close relationship, both economically and personally, with the British and through travelling abroad. Consequently, the Burdwan Raj was familiar and comfortable with the European way of life (interview, Karuna Devi

2004). Journalist, artist and Kolkata identity Desmond Doig, was a regular guest at the Burdwan Palace and writes in his book of visits to reception rooms piled with statuary, and hung with enormous oil paintings, including originals by the Daniells' (Doig 1968, p.19). Some of these paintings are now on display in the Victoria Memorial Museum.

Conclusion

The descriptions of the sample of Great Houses in this chapter have established that Kolkata's wealthy indigenous elites admired and replicated the British neo-classical architecture that rose in their city due to colonial rule. The Great Houses are a testimony to their aspirations. The great *zamindari* estates were also an antecedent but the trend for sprawling estates began to diminish at the same time as the European architectural influence began to rise. The deviation in the layout of the Burdwan Palace can be seen as the culmination of British influence on the aspirations of the wealthy indigenous elites. The following chapter analyses the information described here to explore the interiors, exteriors and ways of life of the Great Families and their residences and the relationship amongst them.

7

EXPLAINING THE GREAT HOUSES: DETERMINANTS OF FORM

The influence of Britain's architectural ideas as exhibited in India and the correlation between the architecture of the Great Houses and the aspirations of the indigenous elites is clear. Overall the Great Houses of Kolkata were symbols of political, social, professional and cultural practises that developed from the Great Families 'past' and their later experiences during colonial rule. As the British choice of Neo-Classicism became embedded in colonial Kolkata the residences of the Bengali elites changed from the sprawling designs of the rural estates to more compact, multi storied European style buildings.

The outside appearance of a Great House was chosen to enhance the buildings aesthetic appeal; to suggest status and to imply affiliations and hierarchies within society. The design layout however, was to enable specific activities to take place within. The primary objective of this chapter is to look at these activities to explain how they shaped the form of the Great Houses. The secondary aim is to examine the aesthetic characteristics of these residences to reveal relationships between the rulers and the ruled and the consequential changes in taste and style of the indigenous elites. As the family structure, interior and exterior style, religious practices and the segregation of male and female are all integral parts of Hindu life in a Great House each component will be now dealt with separately, allowing an understanding of the architectural components of these buildings. This chapter covers three topics in order to understand how the ways of life and aesthetic values shaped a Great House:

1. Ways of Life
2. The Layout of the Great Houses
3. Aesthetic Qualities of Interiors and Exteriors

With this background it then goes on to describe how these factors have influenced the layout of the houses. Once that has been done the aesthetic qualities of interiors

and exteriors is described. The first of the three parts, the description of ways of life, is a precursor to an explanation of plan forms. The second relates ways of life to plan forms and the third deals with appearances.

Ways of Life

A knowledge of the everyday life lived by wealthy families in a Great House is valuable in understanding the form these houses took. The most important components of everyday life were the functioning of the joint family, the nature of male and female roles and religious traditions that shaped much. It is important to understand these components in addition to the function of servants and their roles in order to form a basis on which to examine the layouts of the Great Houses.

The Nature of the Family

Typical wealthy Bengali families were and still are 'joint' families with perhaps even four generations living together. The structure of a Hindu joint family was a hierarchical, composite one, with the elderly grandfather or grandmother as the head of the family representing orthodoxy and tradition and then the sons and their wives and children. The sons were the earning members of the family. When married, sons generally did not consider leaving the family home, but regarded themselves as belonging to it and as such contributed to the joint income of the family. In the women's areas, which encompassed children, female relatives, mistresses and domestic servants, the owner's mother or wife was the head,. Within the house upper class Hindu women led a life of seclusion inside women's territories. If they did leave the women's quarters they followed the Mughul custom of *purdah*[1].

During the nineteenth century there were debates on domestic values but the orthodox joint family was emphatically defended by both traditional and modern representatives for the; 'domestic feelings and affection of the Hindu, his pure

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[1] *Purdah* is a Persian word which means literally 'curtain'. It is the practice of preventing men from seeing women and takes the form of physical segregation of the sexes and the requirement for women to conceal their form. Purdah exists in various forms in the Islamic world and among orthodox Hindu women in parts of India.

benevolent love of kith and kin, the result doubtless of caste and the isolated condition of family life' (N.R. Sinha 1967, p. 406). Despite the adherence to the traditional 'joint' family, the eventual growth of these families led to accommodation problems, no matter how big the house.

The Extended Joint Family

Additions and alterations were one way of initially solving accommodation problems as a 'joint' family grew, the result of which is that it is difficult in finding a Great House in north Kolkata that is original. Many Great Houses were repeatedly extended over decades until new houses were built close by when land became available. Sometimes as many as four or five houses in a row were purchased for sons, and these would be rented out until they were needed. An example of this is the Roy family of Bartala who owned so many houses that the area became known locally as 'Roy City'. Other examples of these phenomena are the multiple residences of the Laha and Datta families (see Figures 7.1 and 7.2) (interviews: Partho Ghosh, 2004 and Gautam Roy, 2005).

Many wealthy families responded to the ongoing problem of accommodating a large family by building more houses. It is not uncommon therefore, to find a group of mansions belonging to the same family juxtaposed in one city block. It is also possible to find the original ancestral home of a Great Family surrounded by a number of mansions of different styles, different ages and built at different angles and aspects, as private residences were not subject to strict building approvals.

These large joint families enjoyed living close together and over the generations many Great Families became connected by marriage, consequently their houses became connected over time with the inclusion of garden gates, tiny private lanes, stairways and even suspended bridges (see Figures 7.3 and 7 4). P. Sinha records in his book the observations of a British district officer interested in Bengali Society; 'I remember an old family, as the family grew the problem of the house room grew too. The wealthier members generally hived off and built separate houses, leaving the old family residence to go to ruin, a rookery for poorer relatives who had nowhere else to go. The only occasions when the others visited it was to worship at the family shrine, when there was often a struggle for precedence, accompanied by fighting' (N.Sinha,

1965). Today there is more emphasis on privacy, particularly as some houses have passed on to other families. Now it is more common to find connecting garden gates to be locked and adjoining walkways bricked up (interview, Laha, 2004).

Figure 7.1. A view of three Great Houses in 2005.

Figure 7.2. Great Houses of the Laha family in 2004.
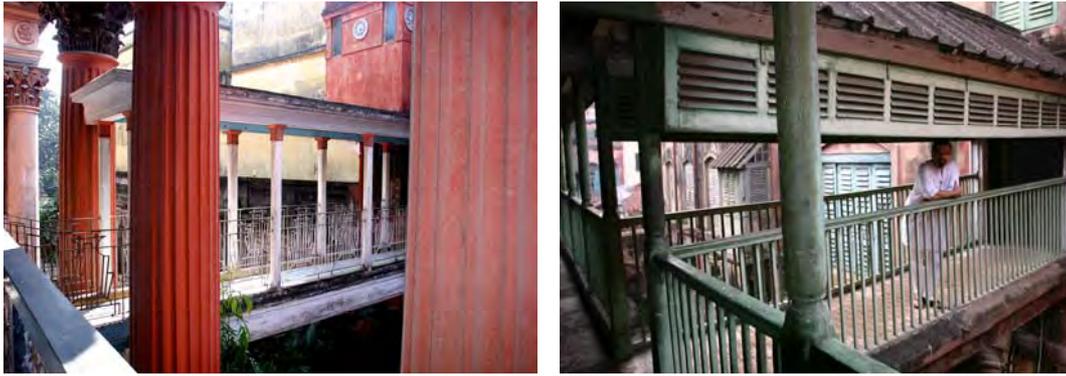
Figure 7.3. *Left*, a connecting bridge, the Mullick's Great House in 2007 and a *right*, a connecting bridge between two Great Houses of the Laha family in 2004.

Figure 7.4. An open connecting bridge, the Laha home in 2004.

In comparison to the communal style of living in earlier times, over the last fifty to sixty years new generations have required more privacy. Often this has resulted in a Great House becoming divided internally (see Figures 7.5 and 7. 6). In other cases a family decided it was necessary to divide consequently some brothers would choose to stay in the ancestral home in north Kolkata, while others would decide to move to houses in the southern areas of the city. Even though some families came to a mutual decision, many elite Bengali families were divided in this way. Pradeep Guptoo recalls families drawing straws to decide who would stay and who would leave the ancestral home and what each son would inherit. When a Great Family owned five or more mansions in a row, each son would draw a house by ballot. The houses were valued independently, and if one house was worth less than the others that son would be compensated (interview, Guptoo 2005). In many cases the newer houses became more desirable to live in and the ancestral home became neglected or even abandoned.

Figure 7.5. *Left*, a wall dividing two houses of the Mullick family with a later house on the right, in 2005.

Figure 7.6. A verandah extends internal space in the Guptoo residence in 2004.

Family Life

Aspects of the rituals and customs that were a part of daily life in a Great House, and which were important and rarely compromised, explains much about the plan forms. These concerns include traditional customs, daily religious observances, sacred events, concerns with caste and the separation of male and female and domestic privacy (Bhattacharyya 2002, p. 304).

Daily activities in a Great House were strictly divided into male and female spaces. In general the lives of men and women were dramatically different. Male members of a Great Family led complex social lives within their residences from the second half of the eighteenth century and increasingly rich, diverse and outward looking lives in the nineteenth century. In contrast female members of a Great Family led restricted inward-looking lives with little access to the outside world, both in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The role of men in a Great House

The male member of a Great Family could access the entire house and were free to access the outside world, for business or pleasure. Business and social meetings were carried out in the men's domain, the 'outer house' or *bahirmahal,* which often included a library and offices; areas of knowledge, business and socialising. Broader activities on a level with their influential positions in Bengali society were also part of life for a wealthy Bengali man. The presiding over community affairs, particularly the *jatimala kachharis*[2]; the indigenous judicial system involved with caste politics (Bhattacharyya 2002, p. 269) was one such activity. Both Raja Nabakrishna (1733-1797) and his grandson Raja Radhakanta Deb (1783-1867) served as judges and mediators of caste disputes in a special office built in their palace in Shovabazar which can be seen in Chapter Six, Figure 6.34.

Bhattacharyya, in her dissertation, cites the biography of Nabakrishna to uncover other influential positions he held. The work associated with these roles was carried out in his residence. He provided:

1. The Persian Secretary's Office
2. The Petition Receiving Office
3. The Money Godown, or Company's treasury
4. The Financial Court of the twenty four parganas[3]
5. The Office of Collector of the twenty four parganas

(Bhattacharyya 2002, p. 269)

With the inclusion of the *jatimala kachharis*, these offices of indigenous administration were carried out in the residences of the Great Houses. The British did not offer space for these official duties in the early days of colonial occupation so it was particularly important to have offices built around a large public space within the houses such as the courtyard where it was easy for visitors and associates to access (Bhattacharyay 2006, p. 269). These offices are still used today, although they are now more usually utilised as offices for family members to carry on their private

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[2] *Jatimala kachharis* began in the early days of colonial occupation (the precise date is unknown), and was a continuation of an earlier, pre-British system and was an indigenous judicial system involved with caste politics. The British had no jurisdiction over indigenous conflicts so the meetings were presided over by influential Bengalis, namely the zamindars and rajas (Bhattacharyya 2003, p. 269).
[3] The Twenty Four Parganas is an important part of the state of West Bengal with its headquarters in Alipore. It includes the urban fringe of Kolkata on its north and the remote riverine villages of the Sunderbans on the south.

professions or businesses. A second indigenous social institution, known as the *dal*, or caste factions, took place in the Great Houses, usually in the sitting rooms. These meetings were related to rituals, marriages and caste within the indigenous community and were attended by prominent Bengali elites.

The absence of public offices or halls created *baithakkhanas*, or sitting rooms, in the Great Houses to be utilised for gatherings. The most typical gathering was for the all important Bengali custom of *adda,* or gossip. Kolkata's wealthy male elites were known for their fondness of *adda* (Raychoudhuri S. 1990, p.71), which could range from simple gossip on a wide range of topics, to deep discussions on important issues such as education, business and social reform. Depending on the number of participants, *adda* was also held in the courtyards of a Great House. In the late-nineteenth century *adda* became more political, with meetings in the Great Houses focussing more on the growing freedom movement (Chattopadhyay 2006, p. 209).

Everyday life for wealthy Bengali men was thus very social and this was catered for in the design and layout of their homes. As the nineteenth century progressed the men led increasingly extravagant, conspicuous, *babu* ways of life outside the home, which will be explained later in this study.

The role of women in a Great House

In contrast to the lives led by male members of a Great Family, the women of a Great Family generally led restricted, inward-looking lives, with little access or knowledge of the outside world during the eighteenth, nineteenth centuries. During the day women were expected to carry out domestic household duties inside the designated female spaces of the house. These duties included the supervising of familial and religious activities, the overseeing of storerooms and servants and the deciding on meals for the day. Religious activities were time consuming, with many small *pujas* (offerings and prayers), a large part of a woman's daily life. The supervision of special meals for religious days throughout the Hindu year was also part of a woman's duties. Though servants prepared meals, small kitchens attached to bedrooms were used for women to cook a favourite dish for their husbands (see Figure 7.7).

Figure 7.7. *Left*, a bedroom with small adjoining kitchen, right, in the Great House of the Datta family in 2005.

It was the female members of the family who upheld traditions by remaining secluded. The less a woman was seen in public the greater her respectability in society. Friction between the women of the *zenana* [4] was common however. Mukherjee writes of the clashes of personality when a large number of women from different backgrounds lived together in a large household (N.Mukherjee 1975, p.410). In the first half of the nineteenth century Fanny Parkes, thought to be one of the first western women to have access to the *zenana*, wrote of the intrigue, scandal and gossip she encountered there (Nevile 2004, p.94).

Women of the Great Families did not leave the inner house except on special occasions. They were generally suppressed, with limited education and little knowledge of the world outside. Even today women in Kolkata, especially the older generation, cover their head if a man is nearby. The role of women and women's

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[4] *Zenana*, a Persian word which refers to the part of a house in countries such as India and Pakistan reserved for the women of the household. The *Zenana* is the apartments in which the women of the family are secluded. This is an Islamic custom, which was introduced into India during Mughul rule.

spaces are explained in more depth when taking into account privacy and segregation of males and females, important issues when considering the form of a Great House

Privacy and Gender Segregation

> 'A woman is someone the sun has not seen'
> (an old Sanskrit saying, interview, Guptoo, 2005).

The privacy of the women in a Great House was very important. All the houses in the Kolkata sample used for this study (except the Burdwan Palace of 1904) were designed with separate living spaces for men and women. As explained previously, the men's spaces of a Great House were usually light and airy and designed for interaction with the outside world. In contrast the women's areas were removed from the gaze of the outside world as the *purdah* system demanded. Any free time was spent having massages, gossipping, playing cards, and resting (Battacharyya 2002, p. 144).

Battacharyya argues that the unequal relationship between men and women stemmed from the men's self-assumed responsibility towards protecting them against westernisation during colonial times (Battacharyya 2002, p. 149), however, female seclusion in the *zenana* of a Great House was also derived from Mughul traditions. This study has mentioned the ways in which Hindu elites emulated the nawabs in architecture, lavish entertaining and ways of life. The seclusion of women had been in place before the arrival of the British.

It is difficult to know perfectly how women lived and worked in the *zenana* of a Great House. What is known is that segregation and lack of freedom from the outside world were experienced by women inside the family residence. Indeed, even segregation within the home itself was common, and although women were free to move about the designated women's areas, any movement to another area was regulated to such an extent that often women would be taken in covered palanquins to go from one section of the house to the other (see Figure 7.8). Women would also be carried in palanquins for ritual bathing in the River Hooghley. Servants who carried the women would dip the whole curtained carriage in the water. In many families this practice continued until the 1950's (interview Guptoo, 2004).
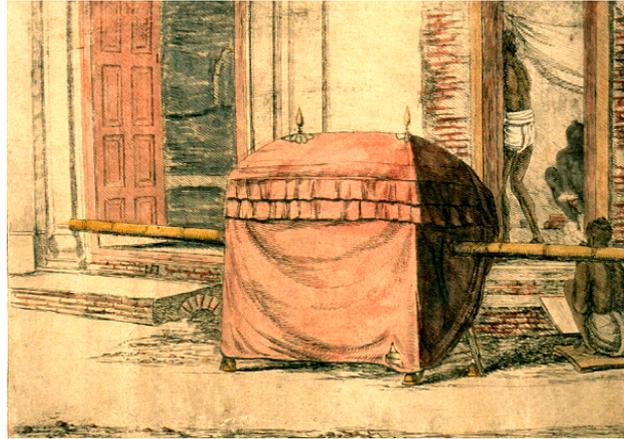
Figure 7.8. Balthazar Solvyns, *Palanquin duli,* c.1760-1824. Source, Bannerjee, S.1981, p. 123.

Bhattacharyya includes a number of accounts in her dissertation that shed some light on the restricted lives led by the women of wealthy families. One such account is from Bankim Chandra Chattyopadhyay's book *Visavriksa* (1873), which includes a description of a sprawling *zamindari* comprising six *mahals*, or rooms, three of which were inner *mahals* used for the family. His wife lived in one, female relatives and attendants in another and daily domestic activities were carried on in the third. While the *zamindar* could access all parts of the house, the female members of the family could not enter the public or outer areas of the house unless it was a special occasion and even then, could only see the proceedings from behind shutters or windows (Bhattacharyya 2002, p. 132).

Abanindranath Tagore wrote of the women and children of the family and their female servants residing in the 'intimate quarters' of the house and only men closely related or known to the family could enter the inner house. Male members of the family did not live in this area (there were no bedrooms in the male areas of the house) but visited at night to sleep, eat and have sex with their wives (Battacharyya 2002, p.142). Mohitkumari Debi, also of the Tagore family, was confined to the four walls of the *zenana* from which not a glimpse of the outside world was visible. Nor did she have permission to go to the balcony. Sharatkumari Chowdhurani was married into the Jorosanko Tagore family as a child of five. She recalls not being allowed to open a window or go outside the *zenana* to play (Bhattacharyya 2002, p.145). These accounts give some insight into the way the *zenana* functioned in most Great Houses of the time.

The seclusion experienced by the women of a Great House was detrimental to their health and wellbeing. The women's areas were often reached by steep, narrow stairs, and constructed with low ceilings with no outward facing windows (see Figure 7.9).

Figure 7.9. Left and middle, corridors linking *mahals* in the Datta Bari in 2005. Right, a corridor linking *mahals* in the Great House of Khelet Ghoshe in 2007.

With no fresh air and little natural light, the living quarters were usually damp and dark. Cooking rooms were without proper chimneys and smoky outlets generally formed part of these living quarters. Courtyards were designated for women but many were not open to the sky. These courtyards were used for household chores and rituals, such as daily prayers for the welfare of the family which centred on the *tulsitala*, or sacred basil plant. The *tulsitala* is usually small and in a square pot which can be circumambulated (Bhattacharyya 2002, p.274).

When women were allowed on the upper galleries or verandahs of the public areas, shutters prevented them from being seen. In some cases these shutters were placed on the balustrades extending upwards rather than being suspended downwards from the lintels above. This design gave even greater seclusion in the case that anyone should look up from the courtyard below (Bach 2006, p.66). In addition, the privateness of the woman's area was fixed only by the absence of those in power in the household (Chattopadhyay 2005, p. 270). Private and public space could be ignored by senior male members of the family therefore the practice of seclusion in Bengali households was often complex and difficult for women.

The design of the Marble Palace also sheds light on daily life in the *zenana*. This inner area is two storied and built around a small courtyard connected by a narrow passageway used only by the family. The inner house cannot be seen from the outer house. Inside several rooms were allocated to the women and children as well as servants needed for everyday domestic chores and rituals. The women of the Mullick family could enter storage rooms and the kitchen. Brahmin priests in charge of daily offerings to the family deity occupied a room near the kitchen and family guests were allocated rooms in another part of the inner house. The family ate together in a dining room, which opened onto a verandah overlooking the courtyard (Bhattacharyya, 2002, p. 158).

In explaining the segregation of women it is important to understand that in colonial Kolkata the European concept of a wife being the partner of a man was not recognised until the late-nineteenth century. It was only then that women's lives began to change due to social reforms, education for women and missionary activities (Bhattacharyya 2002, p. 270).

Pradeep Guptoo's family home, mentioned earlier in this study, is an exception to the unhealthy confinement of women in a large, wealthy Bengali family as the home includes an open courtyard for women. This deviation resulted from Pradeep's 'strong' grandmother asking her husband to extend the women's area of the house to include an airy courtyard space for the women of the family. Her husband, who was enlightened and sympathetic to the restrictions society placed on women, built an open, sunny courtyard on the first floor, something unusual for the times (see Figure 7.10).
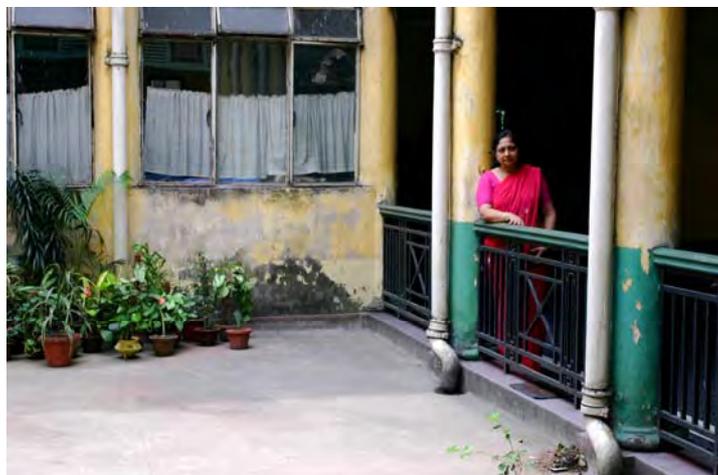
Figure 7.10. The open courtyard for women in the Guptoo residence, in 2004.

This study of privacy and gender segregation in a Great House has described in general and what is known to this author, the daily lives of male and female elites in a Great House. The segregated movement patterns and how the Great Families were committed to living within the bounds of familial and societal customs. In the context of colonial Kolkata, these factors help in understanding the particular layout, similar in most Great Houses, which allowed for these traditional activities and customs to take place. The continuity of complex and relatively luxurious ways of life was achieved by the economic success of these entrepreneurial Bengalis and in turn, by a large number of servants that were part and parcel of maintaining a Great House and the family within.

Servants, segregation and caste

'In the old days, when I was a boy, there were fifteen to twenty adult family members living here. We were all fed from a joint kitchen, we all lunched together. The cooks would make the food, but sometimes my grandmother would sit with twenty or more grandchildren in a circle around her and feed each one by hand. I remember lots of *Durga Puja* ceremonies in the house and many servants. There was even a servant employed just to maintain the clocks!'

(interview, Guptoo, 2004)

The Great Families of colonial Kolkata employed many servants and tradespeople to support their way of life and run their enormous houses. The limitations of India's caste system meant that certain jobs could not be shared and these important caste considerations affected the layout of a Great House. Servants such as sweepers could only sweep the bathrooms. Women servants prepared meals in cooking rooms but bearers were the only ones who could serve them. It is probable, writes Bhattacharyya, that office workers were also employed by wealthy merchants and housed within the confines of a Great Houses, with successive generations continuing to do so. In fact the Mullick family of the Marble Palace relate that the family priest and carpenters live on the property even today (Bhattacharyya 2002 p. 141).

The caste system also deemed that sweepers who cleaned the toilets were also impure and so could only access them through a back door or alley. There was no concept of a bathroom attached to the bedroom; this was a British concept and as toilets were considered impure they were generally located outside the residence, behind the apartments for women and children. Many and varied servants used different doors at

the back of the house, or used stairs which were accessed through complicated entrances and exits, invisible to the aristocratic residents within (see Figures 7.11). Despite their limited access to some areas of the house, it was often the servants, even more than some members of the family, who really knew the history, layout and secrets of a Great House (interview, Servani Guptoo, 2004).

Most Great Families had no reservations about having their servants living with them or close by. Servant's quarters were usually located near gatehouses, or at the rear of the building or indeed in any nook or cranny of the exterior of a Great House (see Figure 7.12). These houses were often built directly on main roads, in busy areas where servants could easily access local tradespeople like washer-folk, cooks, cleaners, oil pressers and providores. This led to many small dwellings of tradespeople growing haphazardly around a Great House. In many ways today's north Kolkata retains many of these characteristics, with small businesses and tradespeople still available for the smallest of jobs and whose families have been carrying on the same practices for generations. Housewives today can still conveniently access on foot what and who they need for domestic work and provisions.

Figure 7.11. The hidden servant's stairs, the Great House of the Laha family in 2004.

Figure 7.12. Servants dwellings in 2007 (house unknown).

Social and everyday life was not the only concern that dictated the design and layout of the Great Houses. Theological and scientific issues also held sway and were important in determining the orientation of the Great Houses.

Religious life

Religion played a large role in the way of life of the Great Families.. Prayers were said at different times throughout the day, usually at dawn and dusk, and special areas within the houses were allocated for various types of worship. Theological concerns determined the direction the houses faced, where possible, but they also determined the placement of rooms for specific activities. It is difficult today to determine which rooms were used for exactly what purpose, as many rooms do not retain evidence of their original use. There is enough documentation and physical evidence, however, to gain an understanding of how these religious aspects affected the form of the Great Houses and to determine that religion was an importance and integral part of the way of life in a Great House. These aspects will now be discussed in two sections; public ceremonies and private worship.

Public ceremonies

Bhattacharyya, in her dissertation, cites a statement by a Hindu craftsman of today that leaves no doubt that theology has always been important to the construction process:

> Without *jyotish* (astrology) you cannot build…By its aspect, you have to decide and calculate the plan. These things are very old…things were never done without *jyotish* (cited in Bhattacharyya 2002, p. 258).

In this case the craftsman is referring to basic principals that must be known as far as possible to Indian architects when designing residential buildings. Astrology helps determine the orientation of the buildings as it is believed the stars have an affect on human matters. Guidelines for construction are found in the Indian architectural treatises, the *Silpa[5] Sastras* (or *Vastu Sastras*), a vast collection of plans for the construction of different types of buildings (as mentioned in the Introduction of this study). Spaces are laid out according to the sacred and activity needs and serve as guides, not only as a scientific base for construction but also by adding a spiritual dimension.

A particular orientation was important not only for light and air but the luck which was believed was bestowed on the family because of the direction of a specific deity. These plans show, for example, that the courtyard, the central part of the house, is the rightful place for Brahma, the Lord of the Cosmos. Similarly the treasury is recommended for the north, where the Lord of Wealth resides. The kitchen is designated to the southeast corner, the dwelling place of the Lord of Fire (see Figure 7.13, 7.14). According to the *Silpa Sastras* the master bedroom should be placed in a southerly direction, for posterity and also practicality, as this position would be pleasant, with ample light and breeze. The *Silpa Sastras* guides for the construction of a Hindu house were as important as the orientation of the land, the personal taste of the owners and the aesthetic appeal of the exteriors. The *Silpa Sastras* could not always be followed strictly, particularly in the growing colonial city of Kolkata. In many cases they were used as a guide, and invariably there followed a relaxation of the tradition. This outcome was also the result of new ways of life and modern ideas borrowed from the British.

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[5] *Silpa* can also spelt *Shilpa*

North west Lord of Wind *Vayu*	North Lord of Wealth *Kubera*	North east Lord *Ishwar*
West Lord of Rain *Varuna*	***Brahma*** **Lord of** **Cosmos**	East Lord of Lords *Indra*
South west Demon *Niruthi*	South God of Death *Yama*	South east God of Fire *Agni*

Figure 7.13. Spaces laid out according to the *Silpa Sastras*. Source, Bhattacharyya, 2002, p. 310.

Granary Cowshed	Treasury	Entrance Porch
Dining hall Study	**Courtyard**	Bathroom store room
Dressing room Store room	Bedrooms	Kitchen

Figure 7.14. The orientation of rooms using the rules of *Silpa Sastra.*
Source, Bhattacharyya, 2002, p. 311.

Figure 7.15 shows Nabakrishna's Palace (1757) corresponded to the rules of *Silpa Sastra* in some aspects, such as the placement of the *jatimala kachari* or treasury, which is in the north, the library or study and the courtyard, however the courtyard of the later Marble Palace (1835) deviates from the rules of the *Silpa Sastras* (see Figure 7.16).

Bhattacharyya states that additions to the Great Houses can make locating the origins of design difficult to understand and that despite the rules of the S*ilpa Sastra* and their

influence, it is almost impossible to determine just how many of these recommendations were followed in determining the final design. The correct northern position of the treasury (according to the *Silpa Sastra*) in the layout of Nabakrishna's Palace compared with the incorrect placement of the courtyard of the Marble Palace (according to the *Silpa Sastra*) sheds some light on the way architects, engineers and owners compromised or were willing to change such rules when designing a mansion or palace. It would also seem most likely that a combination of the spiritual and the practical were followed. New spaces such as offices and banquet halls, necessary for urban rajas to maintain a European way of life, would have far outreached the rules of *Silpa Sastra* (Bhattacharyay, 2002, p. 363).

Interestingly, today many new residences are still constructed according to the *Silpa Shastra*. Contemporary advertisements on billboards in Kolkata promoting new residential complexes are advertised as being 'per *Vastu Shasta* for happiness and well being of occupation'. As these residences are new developments on the outskirts of the city it is unlikely that space is an issue, unlike the precinct of north Kolkata in colonial times and even more so today.
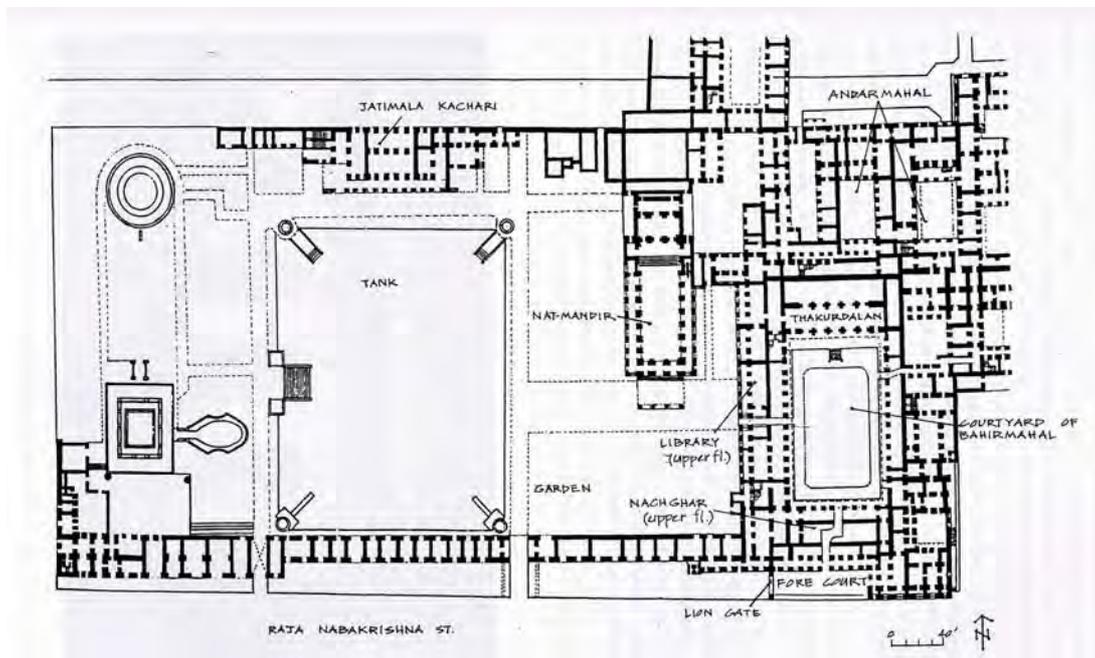
Figure 7.15. A drawing of the ground floor of Raja Nabakrishna's Palace, *c.* mid-nineteenth century, with north to the top. Source, Chattopadhyay 2005, p. 154.
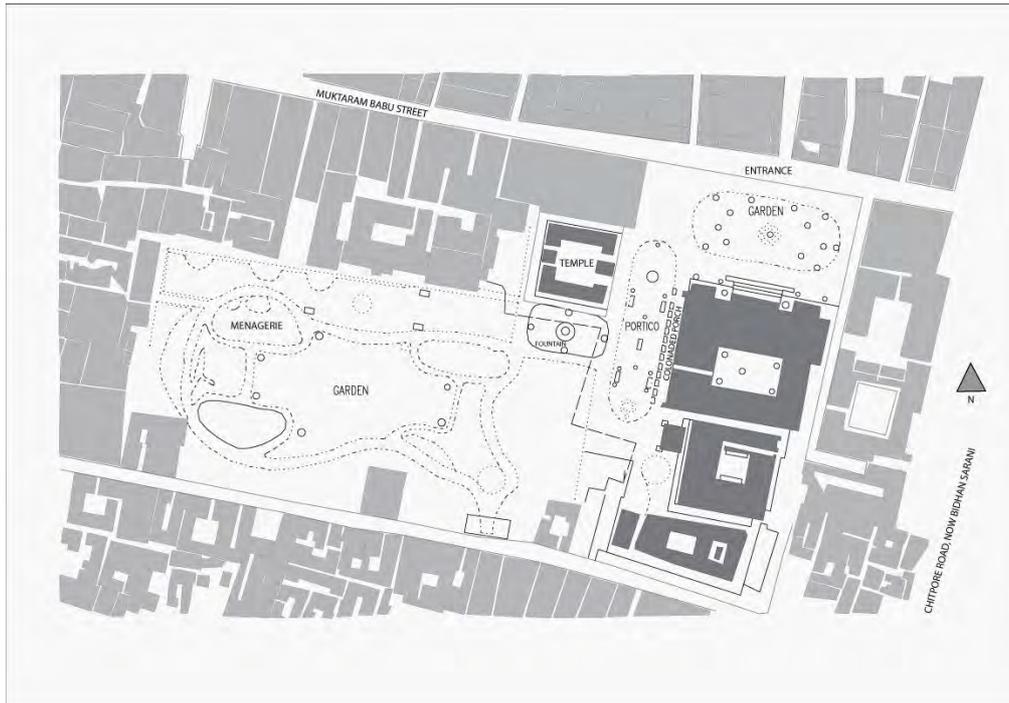
Drawing by Furio Vallich of Gordon and Vallich, Architects.

Figure 7.16. A drawing of the Marble Palace with north to the top as Figure 7.15. Note direction of courtyard. Source, K.M.C.

Though Kolkata's wealthy merchants would have experienced practical difficulties in maintaining both professional and personal relationships with their British rulers, as a group the Great Families remained devoutly Hindu despite:

1. Appearing thoroughly westernised in manner and dress.
2. Being the products of European commerce and early East India Company administration.
3. The overwhelming influence of European values on them by the nineteenth century.
4. Centuries of colonial rule and the British aim of 'westernising' their colonial subjects.

The extent of the Great Families' religious convictions often surprised their British rulers; however there were other issues at stake. By preserving the old social values and behaviour they could identify with traditional society, in other words the ruling class, and so hopefully rise in social scale. Even today many remaining families in extant Great Houses are still known for their religiosity and observances of traditional Hindu festivals.

The celebration of *durga puja* was the opportunity to conspicuously display religious convictions. In colonial times, the *thakur dalans* and courtyards of the Great Houses were the setting for the *durga puja* and other large scale religious festivals that take place throughout the Hindu year. The worship of the goddess *Durga,* the most important of these festivals, was, and is still, celebrated on the most auspicious days of September and/or October according to the Gregorian calendar year, 'when the sun treads softly in the Bengal landscape'[6]. On the final day of the festival the clay figures of *Durga* are ritualistically immersed in the Hooghley River.

Up to the later part of the eighteenth century religious festivals were restricted to the mansions of the wealthy merchants of Kolkata and the most elaborate and expensive celebrations were held in the homes of the Great Families. The impact of religious observances on the layouts of the Great Houses will be described later in the chapter. In rural Bengal, the landed families, or *zamindars*, financed *pujas* for their villages, which were often staged in *mandaps,* or large halls, attached to their residences or in temples on their properties. These families were most likely to have had non-immersable deities. As the rural *zamindaris* began to decline so did their costly *durga pujas*. *Pujas*[7] have always been a means of demonstrating wealth and prestige. In the course of eighteenth century Bengal these functions strengthened the indigenous elite's claims to identity and power. From the late eighteenth century there is evidence of the newly wealthy Hindu merchants sponsoring grand *durga pujas,* which included the sacrifice of animals, still practiced in some temples in Kolkata today (see Figure 7.17).
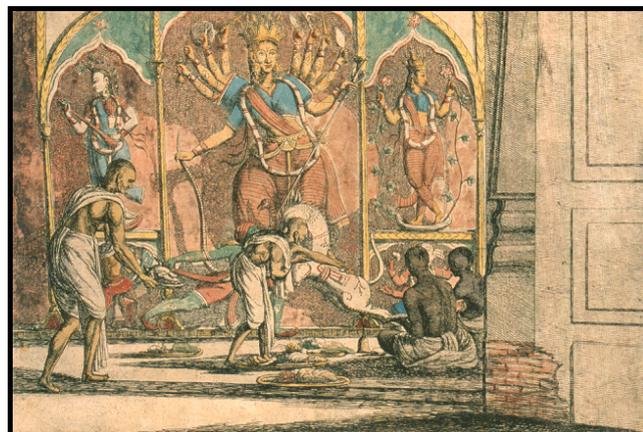
Figure 7.17. Balthazar Solvyns' *Durga Puja'* (detail), 1799.
Source, Bannerjee, S 1981, p. 43.

[6] This is an old Bengali saying (interview Arkhil Sarcar, 2005)
[7] *Puja* is a religious observance or festival

The patronage of religious festivals was a means to confirm, and enhance their growing social status. Newspaper reports of the day described the rich and their *pujas*, and until the 1830's, when the tide of opinion began to turn against the wealthy indigenous elites, Europeans enjoyed attending the functions.

Figure 7.18. *Left*, the exterior of the temple. Figure 7.19. *Right*, the interior of the temple in 2005.

Figure 7.20. *Left*, small *puja* rooms in the courtyard of the Andul temple. Figure 7.21. *Right*, inside one of the *puja* rooms, in 2005.

Raja Nabakrishna Deb's's Palace is thought to be the first of north Kolkata's palaces to hold a grand *durga puja* (interview, Deb, 2004). Nabakrishna was also the first to invite British dignitaries to join the traditional Hindu festival. This famous and glamorous affair was complete with the firing of canon. With this event Nabakrishna celebrated Robert Clive's victory at Plassey and included British dignitaries as his guests. This event introduced the fashion of entertaining lavishly at *durga puga* and from that time on it became a status symbol to include Europeans as guests. As mentioned earlier in this study, Robert Clive travelled the thirty kilometres from Kolkata to Andul with twenty friends, all on horseback, to attend the *durga puja* of the Andul Raj in their palace in Howrah. The Andul family's trust, established

generations ago, maintains the temple (see Figures 7.18, 7.19, 7.20, 7.21) and the Brahmin priests. For the family, it is the deity who funds the expensive and elaborate *durga puja* each year (interview, Mitra, 2005).

The festival has developed from being a strictly religious occasion to becoming a more social event. This change developed from the success of Gandhi's anti-untouchable movement in 1933 which resulted in the participation of all castes in religious festivals. Subsequently neighbourhood communities and organisations began setting up and conducting their own festivals and the *pujas* became very popular again, with lesser deities, such as Kali, being included. In some remaining Great Houses however, the *durja puja* is still performed every year and there is much pride in this continuity. The Laha and Datta families, among others, hold large *durga puja* festivals every year. Today's *durga duja* includes the buying of new clothes and special foods for entertaining, the giving of gifts, donating to charities and visiting the elaborate *pandals*[8] erected by different communities throughout the city which are visited by all sections of Kolkata society. These temporary structures house the goddess in her various forms (see Figures 7.22, 7.23. 7.24, 7.25).

Figure 7.22. *Above*, a *durga puja pandal*. Figure 7.23. *Below*, the goddess *durga* in 2006.

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[8] Elaborate temporary structures erected for *durga puja*. Made from bamboo with cloth stretched and painted, they appear as solid and realistic. *Pandals* made to look like palaces and multi storied temples among other designs, appear on street corners throughout the city during the month of October.

Figure 7.24. *Left*, festival lights during *durga puja* in 2006. Figure 7.25. *Right*, *dhaks*, musicians, during *durga puja* in 2005.

Religion; private worship

The Great Families' outward displays of religious faith through large religious festivals were also accompanied by private, everyday home worship traditions. Many Great Families built private temples in their gardens or devoted entire floors in their homes to house the family deity. As Hindu rituals were always serious, devout affairs, these sacred spaces within the grounds or inside the courtyards of a Great House were very important and designed with great care and attention (see Figures 7.26, 7.27, 7.28, 7.29).

Figure 7.26. A family temple in the grounds of a riverside mansion north of Kolkata, in 2007.

Figure 7.27. *Left*, a temple in the garden of 'Yulebank', the Jatri family home near Kolkata, in 2007. Figure 7.28. *Right*, the interior of the Jatri temple.

Figure 7.29. *Left* and *right*, a family temple in Cossipore, in 2005.

Within the religious spaces the goddess resides, and these deities vary in size and shape from family to family as the joint families grew, and more houses were built, the deity had to be shared and so would travel from house to house, to be treated as a loving mother or as a daughter of the family for part of each year. A whole series of rooms would often be devoted to housing the deity and these would be cleaned and prepared for her stay. To understand more completely how religion played a role in the design of Kolkata's Great Houses this study uses the home of the Guptoo family, a sprawling late-nineteenth century mansion in Middleton Road, now William Jones

Sarani, in the centre of the city. Despite the high taxes imposed on old, large houses in the city area, this family of eight adults and four children keep a series of rooms on their roof for their family deity (see Figures 7.30, 7.31), (interview, Guptoo, 2004).

Figure 7.30. *Left*, the entrance to the deity's apartments in the Guptoo home in 2004. Figure 7.31. *Right*, a room for the deity's cooking utensils, in 2004.

These rooms are decorated with black and white marble floors, polished timber cupboards, and green shuttered windows. The timber cupboards and shelves house numerous cooking pots and platters, the number and type parallelling the family's kitchen below. A beautiful miniature four-poster bed complete with bed linen, velvet quilt and mosquito netting ensures the comfort of the deity who is treated like a much loved member of the family. Each year the Guptoos hold their *durga puga* centred round the family's hand-sized deity. The provenance of this is mysterious, as the family do not know what it is or what it is made of, simply that they have been worshipping it ever since their ancestors brought it to Kolkata from their ancestral village generations ago. For three months of the year the Guptoo's deity is in residence at William Jones Sarani. A special marble altar is used for her daily worship and at night the deity is placed in her bed. For the rest of the year the deity travels to the homes of other family members who each take 'turns' in caring for her. The family also have an 'everyday' shrine, where they hold a daily *puja* and at sunset worship Lakshmi, the goddess of well being (see Figures 7.32, 7.33, 7.34, 7.35).

Figure 7.32. *Left,* the 'everyday' shrine in 2004. Figure 7.33. *Right*, the special shrine, in 2004.

Figure 7.34. *Left*, the bed for the deity in 2004. Figure 7.35. *Right*, Sarvani Guptoo in the deity's rooms in 2004.

The Great House of the Roy family of Bartala (see Figure 7.36) is an example of the private and public aspects of religion. The apartments for their family deity are carefully decorated. The altar for the deity is in a temple design and takes pride of place in a black and white tiled room (see Figure 7.37). Each year during the *durga puja,* the Roy family open their home to the people of their ancestral village who travel to worship the deity who is placed in the *thakur dalan* of the courtyard (see Figures 7.38, 7.39). Gautam Roy explains: 'the deity belongs to the villagers just as much as she does to the family' (interview, Gautam Roy, 2005).

Figure 7.36. The Great House of the Roy family of Bartala in 2005.

Figure 7.37. *Left*, the hallway of the Roy family's home in 2005. Figure 7.38. *Right*, the altar for the deity in 2005.

Figure 7.39. The courtyard and *thakur dalan* of the Roy family in 2005.

By discussing religious life in a Great House this segment of the chapter has explained the public and private spaces allocated for traditional religious worship. The Great Families retained their traditional religious observances while presenting themselves as thoroughly westernised to their colonial rulers. In some ways the traditional way of life within the Great Houses can be seen as the only reality for the Great Families in their otherwise constructed colonial world in Kolkata. The following descriptions of the layout of the Great Houses describe how daily life and ritual activities dictated the form of the Great Houses.

The Layout of the Great Houses

The relationship between domestic life, space and the design of the Great Houses it has been argued here is important. As previously mentioned, by the nineteenth century the Great Houses were smaller than earlier models, and the two *mahal* plan had become a regular feature of the residences of the Bengali elite. Polygamy, the large number of children and gender segregated quarters made more than one *mahal* necessary in a wealthy Bengali household. Figure 7.40 shows the two *mahal* plan.
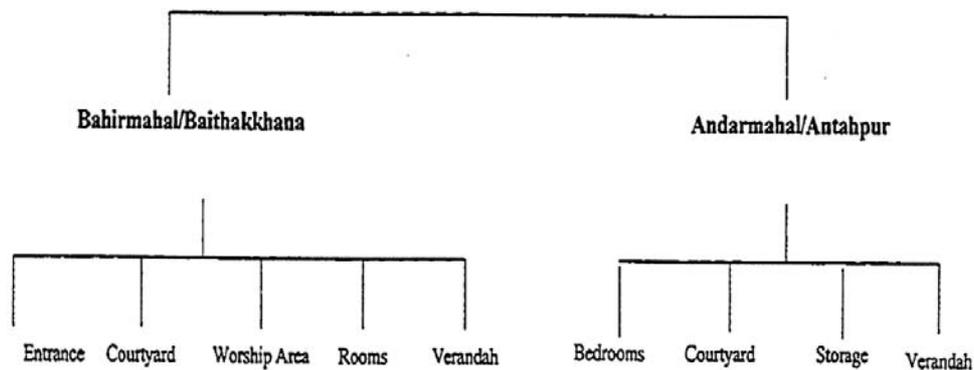
Figure 7.40. A diagram showing the division of space in a mansion with two *mahals*. Source, Bhattacharyya 2002, p.201

The two *mahal* plan consists of two separate areas where specific activities took place. These were divided into:

1. The *bahirmahal/baithakkhana* or the 'outer house' which was the public area, or men's domain, used for business activities on a daily basis or for social functions and religious ceremonies. Though restricted to a specific area, women could access the *bahirmahal* during religious festivals.

2. The *andarmahal/antahpur* or 'inner house', which was allocated to the women and children of the family and designated for domestic life.

These separate *mahals* were of different sizes, built over one or two levels and had a courtyard as the central point. The sprawling estates and many of Kolkata's Great Houses of the eighteenth century comprised as many as seven *mahals*, some of which were often separate dwellings (see Figure 7.41).
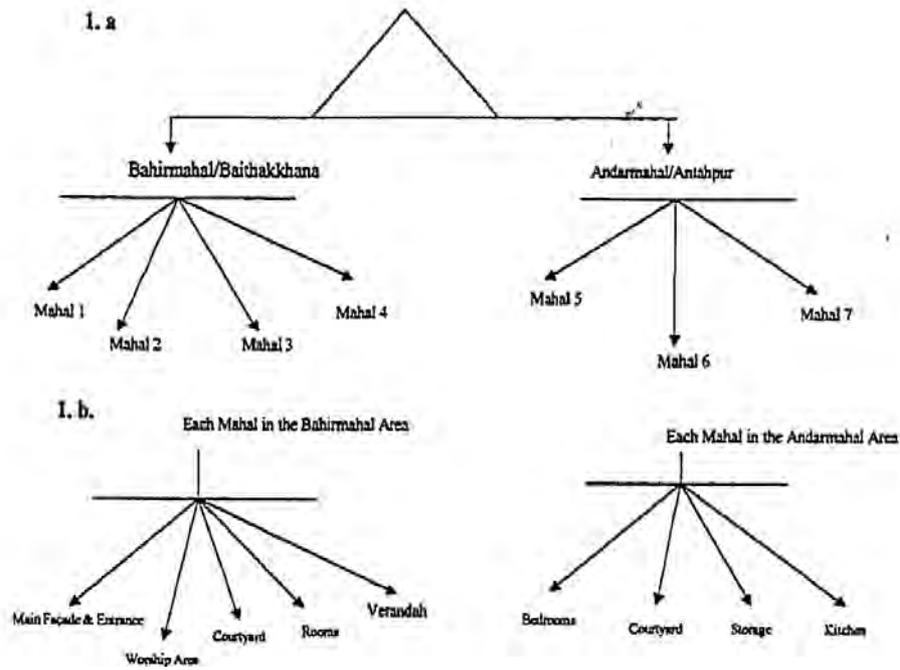
Figure 7.41. A diagram of a residence with seven *mahals.* Source, Bhattacharyya 2002, p. 201.

The *mahals* of north Kolkata's Great Houses were not isolated but connected internally by daunting passages and stairways, often dark and tunnel-like. These passageways were complicated and their existence often known only to the family or their servants (see Figure 7.42). Connecting passages such as these were also developed in the second half of the nineteenth century, when many Great Houses were altered and these additions were often ad hoc affairs, with haphazard ways of connecting the old and the new.
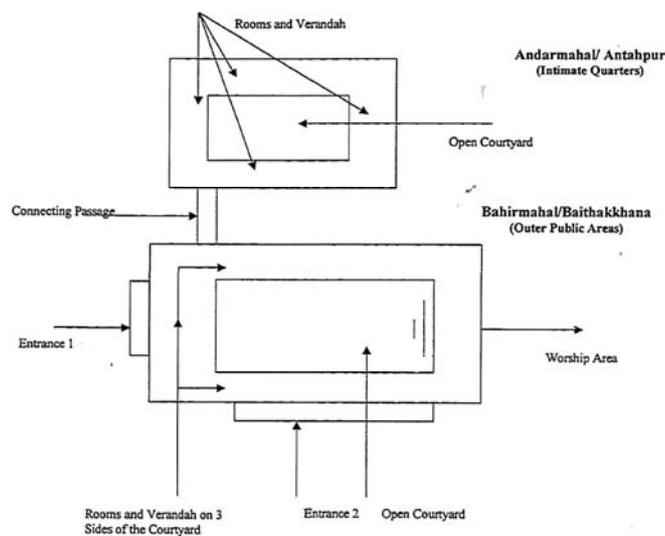
Figure 7.42. A two *mahal* plan residence with a connecting passage. Note that the plan shows two entrances; one for the family and guests, the other for servants, or the servants and women of the *zenana*. Source, Bhattacharyya 2002, p. 202.

These narrow alleys built over various levels and the hidden spaces of a Great House were often tortuous to negotiate. When recalling the house in which he grew up, Abindranath Tagore wrote of the 'journey from the treasury room' of the house to the *thakurghar*, or worship room:

> 'Walking from the treasury room on the first floor along various narrow alleys, stairs and courts…' and further, ' After crossing the store room came a small red tiled courtyard, freshly washed. From there the north wall of the *thakurghar* became visible, but it could not be reached easily. On the north side of the courtyard a few steps led to a room-wide staircase that led straight to the second floor. Next to this staircase was the room for the palanquin. After that a narrow alley – walled on one side a wooden balustrade…'
>
> (Chattopadhyay 2006, p. 170)

Abindranath likened traversing from one part of the house to the other as being 'a journey outward from the centre of the self, from the space of confinement' (Chattopadhyay 2006, p.170). Abindranath's home was originally his great grandfather's *baithakhana*, or salon, built in 1823 next to the ancestral home in Jorosanko. This detached house was designed for Dwarkanath Tagore's offices and public life. Later it was extended for use as a home for the large Tagore family, creating the many levelled, narrow alleys and secret corners that touched the imagination of Abindranath Tagore (Chattopadhyay 2005, p. 170). Today the *baithakhana* no longer exists; the land it once stood on is now part of the gardens of the Rabindra Bharati University.

The layouts of the Great Houses have certain similarities, despite minor and sometimes major variations. Typical houses built by wealthy Bengalis in north Kolkata followed the same pattern; dwelling house, women's quarters, *thakur dalan* or worship area with an adjoining *natmandir* or stage for performances, *nachgar*, or dance hall, *kachharikhana,* or office, *schoolgar* or study, parlour, strongroom, servant's quarters, stables and granary (Deb, C. 1990, p.58).

The Datta Bari stretches over sixty rooms and over the years has been altered and added to, resulting in a puzzling layout full of multiple small sets of steps and tunnels on various levels to link the *mahals*. Two main internal staircases situated at each end of the house allow for the circulation of residents as one set is used exclusively for ascending and the other for descending, allowing the house to be traversed quickly

despite its size and number of occupants. The results are a complex, rambling style, and a number of rooms with no external windows. Within the house there are very small, open courtyards where cross ventilation is not successful. Levels of rancid water demonstrate that drainage is now inadequate in these tiny spaces, as is the case with many similar old buildings in north Kolkata (see Figures 7.43, 7.44, 7.45).

Figure 7.43. A small courtyard with two sets of stairs, Datta Bari in 2005.

Figure 7.44. *Left*, a small courtyard, the Datta Bari in 2005. Figure 7.45. *Right*, a small set of stairs, the Datta Bari, in 2005.

The two *mahal* plan of most Great Houses allowed for diverse gender activities to remain separate, with guests in the public areas, which included the courtyard, the central focus of each *mahal*. In the following chapter the multiple purpose courtyard, vital to the way of life in a Great House, will be examined.

The Role of the Courtyard

The courtyard space was the heart of a Great House, a multi-purpose site and the centre of all activities such as:

1. The receiving of guests
2. Family recreation
3. Gossip
4. For men to sometimes drink alcohol (Bhattacharyya 2002, p.273.
5. Occasional plays or entertainments
6. Daily household chores
7. Sacred and religious ceremonies

A courtyard generally centred each *mahal* of a Great House and was important for security and for visual privacy as nothing could 'offend a native more than the erection of an edifice overlooking the interior of that enclosure in which his family resides' (Evenson 1989, p.67) With an opening to the sky, the courtyard facilitated light and ventilation and created a large space for the family to gather, removed from life on the street (see Figure 7.46).

Figure 7.46. The courtyard of the Great House of Ramlochan Ghosh in Pathuriaghata in 2007.

The traditional inward-looking courtyard house was opposite in design to the outward-looking British bungalows set in large gardens which were typical of the European area of Kolkata. The lack of knowledge regarding Indian ways of life and

architecture becomes clear with the comments of a British physician in Kolkata in 1837 who described the courtyard as a 'hollow square' when observing the houses of the 'rich natives' with the 'abode of the Hindu gods', furnished with 'considerable value if the owners are wealthy' and jutting out from the main building, 'smaller hollow squares with pretty verandahs opening inwards' (Evenson 1989, p. 67). In most cases the entrance to the main courtyard of a Great House is accessed from the street via a dark hallway lined on either side by a raised platform, or *ro'ak*, which was used as a place to sit, wait or socialise in the cool shade (interview, Akhil Sarcar, architect, Kolkata), (see Figures 7.47 and 7.48). *Ro'aks* were also built outside the entrance to a courtyard house, on the street, however, times have changed and today many can be seen with sloping covers to prevent people sitting.

Figures 7.47. *Left*, a *ro'ak*, outside a north Kolkata house in 2005. *Right*, a covered *ro'ak* in 2005.

Figure 7.48. Entrance to courtyard houses in north Kolkata in 2005. Note the *ro'ak* on either side.

A courtyard is surrounded on three sides by numerous public rooms such as the *nachghar*, dancing room, *baithakhana*[9] or hall, and the library and offices. The fourth side of the main courtyard is the worship area or the *thakur dalan*, the most important part of the house. On special occasions, such as the religious festival of *durga puja*, the family deity would be enthroned and the whole courtyard would be covered and well lit, giving the space a festive quality. Religious items for the festivals were stored in the small spaces beneath the *thakur dalan* (see Figure 7.49), which often had small doors or screens opening onto the courtyard. Almost all worship areas of North Kolkata's Great Houses were built on the north or northwest of an imaginary central line dividing the courtyard into north and south (see Figures 7.50). The altar faced south and the deity was placed facing the same direction, therefore the devotee faced north when worshipping. The *thakur dalan* and the importance of the deity's direction determined the orientation of the remainder of the building. The engineers, architects and *munshis* who designed the Great Houses worked around the courtyard, assembling seemingly separate portions which were then assembled as a whole (Chattopadhyay 2005, p. 198).

Figure 7.49. The *thakur dalan* and storage rooms below the courtyard of Motilal's Sil's Great House, in 2005.

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[9] The outer part of a Great House, or large mansion of wealthy Bengali merchants used for business, entertainment and religious worship.
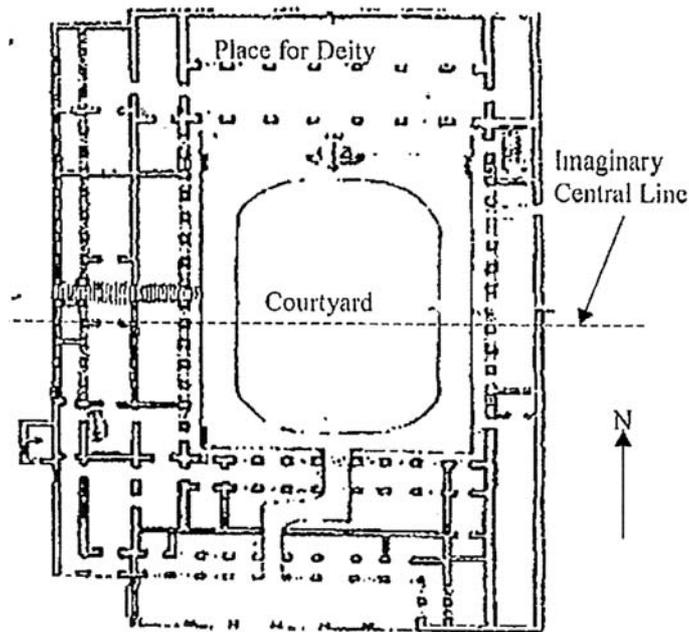
Figure 7.50. Drawing showing imaginary line in a courtyard house. Source, Bhattacharyya 2002, p. 312

The courtyard was designed to combat Kolkata's tropical, humid climate. Cross ventilation was deemed essential, therefore the courtyard was open to the sky to allow fresh air to flow in, down and into the various rooms surrounding the inner space. Whether large or small, typical north Kolkata houses all have inner courtyards and are often simply called 'courtyard houses' for this reason (see Figure 7.51). Some Great Houses had as many as three or four courtyards of various sizes, their number and size usually dependent on the wealth and importance of the owner.

The *zenana*, or women's area usually had a courtyard, although it was always smaller than the courtyard of the 'outer house', or *bahirmahal*. Despite most Great Families embracing Classical exteriors and interiors, the majority of north Kolkata's Great Houses retained inner courtyards.

Figure 7.51. *Left*, a small courtyard house and right, a small courtyard in Mitali Law's mansion, both in north Kolkata in 2004.

Milon Datta's ancestral home, c. 1850, on Bidhan Sarani Street, was built by merchant Dwarkanath Dutt. The Great House has seen better days however the large courtyard and *thakur dalan* are still impressive (see Figure 7.52). The plan of the house in figure 7.53 shows the many rooms that typically surround the multiple courtyards of a Great House.

Figure 7.52. The courtyard and *thakur dalan* of the Datta Bari in 2005.
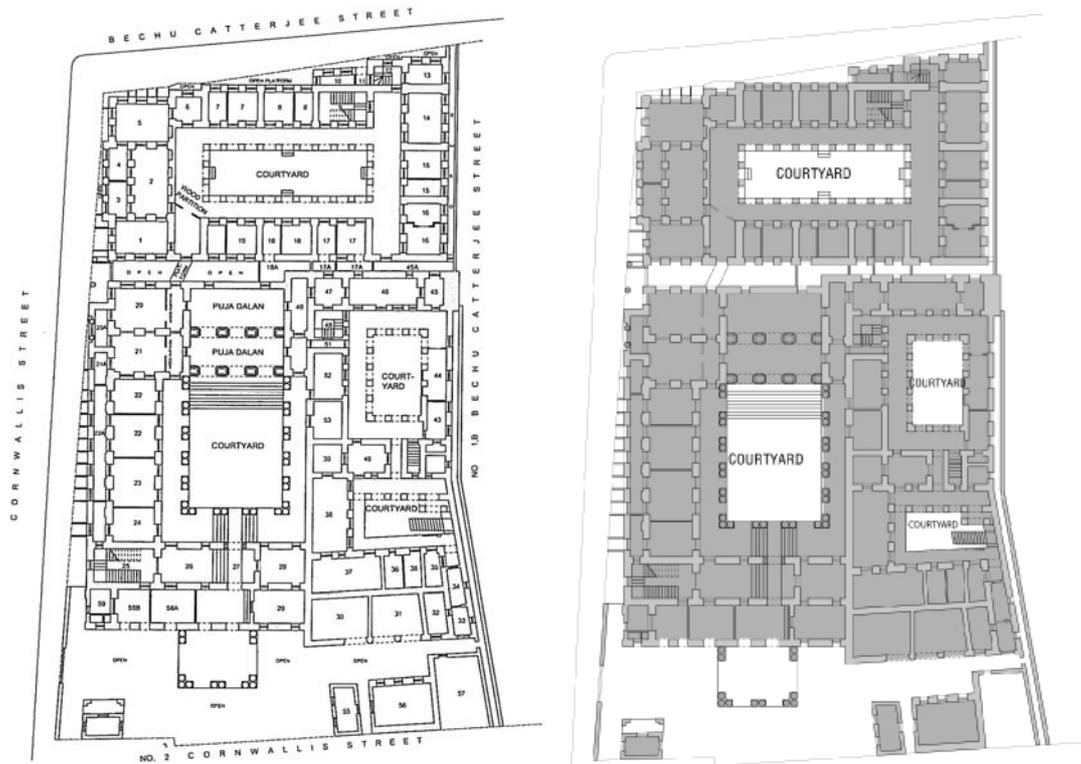
Drawing by Furio Valich of Gordon and Valich architects

Figure 7.53. *Left*, a drawing of the ground floor of the Datta Bari. *Right*, shaded areas indicate approximate covered areas of the house. Source, Milon Datta, 2005.

The courtyard functioned as a private and social space for family members as well as a space for religious functions. Enormous sums of money were spent on ceremonies such as s*radhs* or after death ceremonies and weddings. Battacharyya includes a description of this extravagant expenditure in her dissertation:

> A wealthy native has been known to offer in this manner: eighty
> thousand pounds of weight of sweetmeats: eighty thousand pounds
> weight of sugar; a thousand suits of cloth garments; a thousand offerings
> of rice, plantains, and other fruits. On one occasion, a wealthy native has
> been known to expend upwards of thirty thousand pounds sterling on the
> offerings, the observances, and the exhibition of a single festival…
>
> (Battacharyya 2002, p. 279)

In addition, the Great Families would open the main courtyard of the *bahir-mahal* to the public during the *durga puja* festivities as mentioned earlier in this study. In a number of extant Great Houses, this practice remains unchanged and the families take great pride in the continuity of this centuries-old tradition. The courtyard was also used for dramatics, particularly before the establishment of professional theatres in Kolkata. The courtyard of the famous Tagore family was the scene of many plays written and performed by Rabindranath Tagore (see Figures 7.54 and 7.55) As the Independence movement gained momentum many courtyards of Great Houses became the setting for freedom speeches and rallies. As mentioned previously, the Basu Palace was one such house.

Figure 7.54. The main courtyard and *thakur dalan* of the Tagore home, in 2005.

Figure 7.55. An opposite view to figure 7.54 above; the raised performance area of the Tagore house, in 2005.

The courtyard house is a successful design used in many parts of the world. In India, apart from examples such as the Bengali rural homesteads, houses traditionally faced inward, whether they were situated in the country or the city (Rapoport 1969, p. 66).

In her book, Evenson includes quotes by Rudyard Kipling who describes north Kolkata as 'a great wilderness of packed houses – just such mysterious, conspiring tenements, as Dickens would have loved' and further, Kipling urges his reader to imagine the architecture of a tiny Indian courtyard by standing 'at the bottom of a lift-shaft and looking upwards' to get an idea of both the size and design of some courtyards around which these 'big, dark houses' are built (Evenson 1989, p. 122). Be that as it may, the courtyards were substantial in size and were essentially the heart of a Great House. As has been argued here, *inside* the Great Houses traditional forms prevailed, the most prominent and enduring feature being the courtyard. The exterior presentation was a different story.

Aesthetic Qualities

Aesthetic values of Bengali elites were much affected by British presence in colonial Kolkata. This phenomenon will be presented in the form of the interiors and the exteriors, to form some understanding of the aesthetic qualities of Kolkata's Great Houses.

The interiors

As noted above, the traditional plan form endured in north Kolkata's Great Houses despite the Great Families exposure to new, European ways of life. The interiors of the Great Houses, however, had taken on European furnishing styles and decorative features as early as the mid-eighteenth century, before the exteriors had begun to show significant signs of British architectural influences. For wealthy Bengalis, particularly in the early nineteenth century, western furnishings along with paintings and sculpture were highly prized and exhibited not only social status but progressiveness.

Most public rooms in Kolkata's Great Houses were large, with high ceilings, and surrounded a main, central courtyard. By the early nineteenth century, the interiors of the grandest homes featured Neo-Classical architectural elements such as Classical columns (see Figure 7.56). On the ground and upper levels the rooms featured shuttered French doors; some decorated with English motifs, opening onto verandahs which overlooked a central courtyard (see Figures 7.57 and 7.58). Rooms deep within the house such as bedrooms, opened into one another through traditional folding timber doors, with no intervening halls, lobbies or windows.

Figure 7.56. Interior of the Prasad. Source, Campbell 1907.

Figure 7.57. A verandah in the home of the Roy family of Bartala in 2005.

Figure 7.58. *Left*, doors in the Laha's home and *right*. stained glass in the Burdwan Palace in 2004.

Due to Kolkata's steamy climate the doors onto verandahs were seldom closed, the courtyard being the sole source of ventilation. Instead a piece of cotton would be hung in the doorway, ending about six inches above the floor. This short 'curtain' would catch the slightest breeze, cooling the darkened rooms and making the heat more bearable (see Figure 7.59). On extra hot days, the fabric would be soaked in water to further cool the room. Despite helping to lower the temperature, these methods of ventilation did nothing for the privacy of the residents, adding to the publicity of life in an Indian house. Members of the family always made sure they called out before entering a room (interview, Elias Duek Cohen, 2004). Other methods of cooling were the installation of enormous *punkahs*, fans, made of fabric stretched over a light rectangular frame, and hand operated by servants (see Figure 7.60).

Figure 7.59. *Left*, door treatments in a Kolkata mansion in 2004. Figure 7.60. *Right*, ceiling fan, or *punka.* Source, Evenson, 1989, p.53.

The ceilings were made of stone panels supported by steel beams (rarely seen in Kolkata's new buildings today) (see Figure 7.61), or *jaggery,* or *chunam;* a white lime plaster mixed with burnt seashells, which was beaten repeatedly to make it firm and waterproof. During British rule, the eunuch community was the only group permitted to carry out this work however, after Independence this arrangement was abandoned. Many eunuchs still carry on their traditional trade today, while others have been forced to gain alternate employment. Ceilings of later Great Houses were often very ornate, in pressed metal or timber and painted in geometric designs (see Figure 7.62).*Chunam* was also used for the exteriors of houses, and when polished it resembled marble, and appeared not dissimilar to the stone used on buildings in Europe (Evenson 1989, p. 51). Good, cheap local stone was not available for building in Kolkata (Marshall 2000, p.317), therefore most British buildings were built in brick to which *chunam* was applied. These methods, though visually striking if kept in good repair, did lead to inadequacies in the British and Indian buildings in colonial Kolkata (Lang et al., 1997, p.60). Palladio's choice of brick layered with stucco for the construction of his buildings was more economical than traditional high quality stone and marble used for palaces.

Figure 7.61. *Left,* the ceiling of the home of Mitali Law, dating from the early-nineteenth century, in 2004. Figure 7.62. *Right*, a ceiling in the Burdwan Palace, dating from the early twentieth century, in 2004.

The Great Families had existed with a minimum of furniture for centuries. Evenson provides a description by an Englishman of the home of a wealthy Indian, who 'sits on a grass mat or cotton *sattrinji* or Cashmere rug with a pillow at his back' adding that in a countryside palace the only furniture would be 'rugs and pillows, cooking pots, gold and silver vessels for eating and drinking, the wardrobes and caskets and the graven images of the gods' (Evenson 1989, p. 71). Many interiors would include a *tukt-posh*, or low dais covered with a quilt and large enough for several people to lounge on. This piece of furniture can still be seen in Kolkata homes today (see Figure 7.63).

Figure 7.63. A *tukt-posh* in the home of Shruti Poddar in 2007.

The arrival of the British resulted in many wealthy Indian families embracing European furniture and decoration, the extent of this becomes clear when examining a list from 1841, of the furnishings for auction from the home of Dwarkanath Tagore.

Much of Tagore's furniture was made by English firms such as Shearwood and Company and Currie and Company. The list included; 'every elegant article required in a first rate establishment' such as chandeliers, clocks, mirrors, furniture such as couches, marble top tables, mahogany chairs, carpets, drawings and St. Anne's chairs (see Figure 7.64 for furniture of this type), a 'grand pianoforte' and a Daurainville organ,[10] 'perhaps the best in India at the time', which played 'the newest opera overtures' (Choudhury 1978, p.62).

The furniture in the Great Houses in the late nineteenth century was generally Victorian in style, imported from Europe, or purchased from shops selling copies made in India. Furniture from the old *zamindari* estates could also be bought at auction houses in Park Street in central Kolkata. Marble topped hall tables were popular and used extensively to line hallways and verandahs to display statues and vases. Chairs of varying Victorian and hybrid designs were also popular (see Figures 7.65 and 7.66).

Figure 7.64. Sitting room, the Roy family of Bartala, in 2005.

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[10] An automated mechanical clockwork organ manufactured by Jean-Honore Daurainville in Paris.

Figure 7.65. A sitting room in the home of Sandip Deb in 2005.

Figure 7.66. Sonali and Priyangeli Basu, the interior of the Basu Bari in 2004.

The interior style can best be described as opulent. Grand reception halls were decorated with Baroque gilding, Persian carpets and velvet curtains. Large European mirrors were plentiful and highly prized by Indian elites, probably because of their size, and their practical and decorative qualities. Most Great Houses included a large number of floor-to-ceiling mirrors which produced the excessively decorative style the Great Families sought. Chandeliers, usually in rich colours like red and green, were equally appealing and often hung en mass, in the hallways, verandahs, ballrooms and the *thakur dalans*. The lights of the chandeliers illuminated in the immense gilt framed mirrors created an image of wealth and opulence, an apt description of the interior style of the Great Houses and a word still used to describe the city's famous merchants and their houses today.

During the late nineteenth century Dwarkanath Tagore's 'Belgachia Villa', the palaces of the Burdwan Maharajahs and the Mullick's Marble Palace displayed vast collections of European art and furniture (see Figure 7.67). Today these collections have diminished due to changes in the fortunes of the Great Families. Guhu-Thakurta notes in her book that few original catalogues or inventories are left and the few that do exist are not dated, making it difficult to ascertain accurately in what period the collections were acquired. Guhu-Thakurta is certain however, that Maharajah Jatindra Mohan Tagore (the Prasad) and the Maharajah of Burdwan had two of the largest art collections and were among the greatest of Bengal's nineteenth century art patrons (Guhu-Thakurta 1992, p. 51).
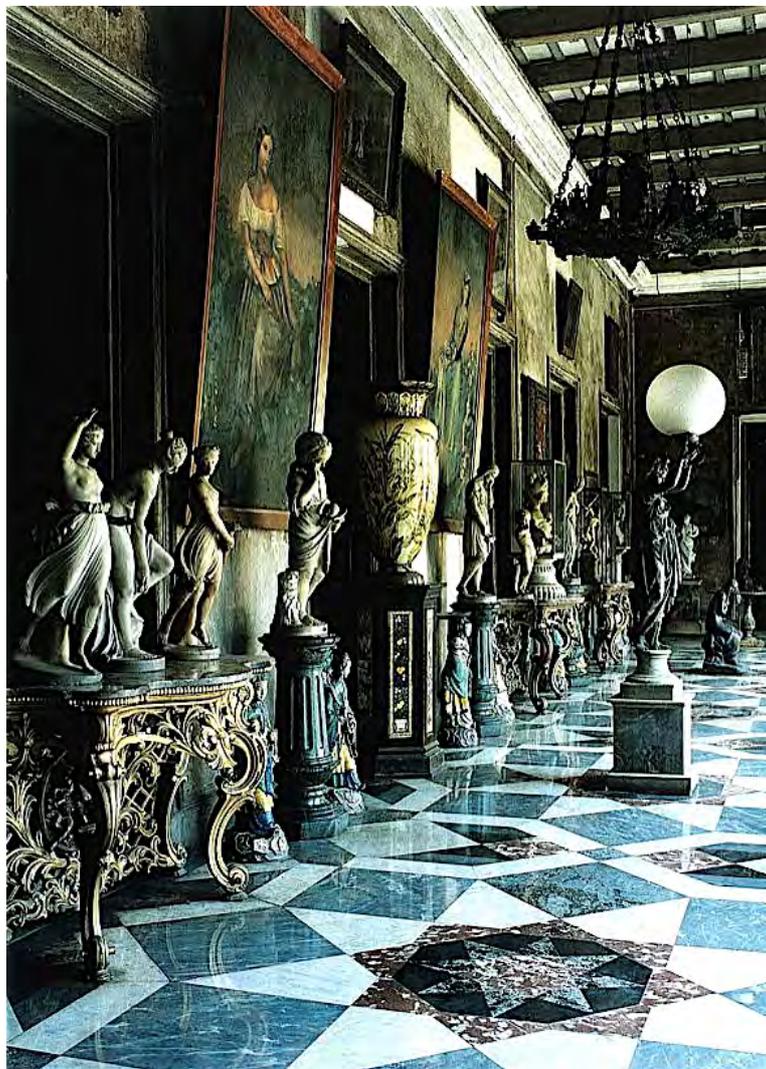
Figure 7.67. A verandah surrounding the courtyard of the Marble Palace. Source, Raulet, 1997.

Figure 7.68. *Left* and *right*, the interior of the Marble Palace. Source, Raulet 1997.

These decorative elements shed light on the Great Families personal image of European ways of life. In some cases however the adoption of western furnishings was a concession to European guests. A British clergyman describing a visit to a Kolkata family in 1871 observed that one room 'looked most comfortable, being furnished in European style; but it was never used except as a show-room to foreigners' (Evenson 1989, p.78).

The way European furniture and decorative elements were prized and displayed can be seen as not only displaying their status and progressiveness but also exposed their desire to be seen as western, educated and modern (see Figures 7.69, 7.70, 7.71). In addition it was welcomed by British guests when attending entertainments in the Great Houses, helping cement alliances between the rulers and the ruled. These entertainments will be described in the following segment.

Figure 7.69. The sitting room of Raja Mookherjee's home in 2005.

Figure 7.70. *Left* and *right*, crystal furniture and clocks, the sitting room of 'Yulebank', the home of the Jatri family.Source, Raulet 1997, p.104.

Figure 7.71. *Left* and *right*, the interior of the Mitter Palace. Source, Raulet 1997, p.101.

Art, Culture and Entertaining

Before the full impact of British colonial rule, the culture of early to mid-eighteenth century Kolkata was very different in concept and values to European culture.

Tradition, religious pursuits and time honoured rules were pursued, and though Persian, Islamic and European influences were present, cultural change was slow and new ideas were of little interest. In Kolkata, music, dancing and the arts were an important part of traditional culture in the upper levels of Bengali society. Music and dance were a part of everyday life, and it was not unusual to see 'dancers, stage people and musicians, with peacock feathers and fans, *chouries* and cloth spread on the ground' in the street, accompanying the rajahs and governors in the important political ceremonies of the day' (Bearce 1965, p.4). The eighteenth century was an era of court pageantry and entertainments. Juggling, tumbling and puppetry also entertained the aristocracy who had the finances and leisure time to enjoy it. Poetry was also patronised by the wealthy merchants and bankers of Kolkata, particularly the *kabiwalas* [11] of Bengal (Bearce 1965, p.6).

The nineteenth century however, confronted Kolkata with dramatic new cultural, economic and political challenges which could not be met within the culture of the eighteenth century. One such challenge was the way in which the colonial system brought the indigenous elites closer to their colonial rulers (as discussed in Chapter Four). These new relationships resulted in the traditional overcrowded rooms of strewn with quilts and bolsters of the eighteenth century being put aside in favour of spacious halls and ballrooms where one could sit on European chairs. British accounts shed light on the style of entertainments and the interior furnishings and decorations in the Great Houses during colonial times. The following description is of a dance presentation held in Kolkata during the *durga puja*;

> On entering the magnificent saloon, the eye is dazzled by a blaze of lights from splendid lustres, triple wall shades, chandelier brass, etc., superb pier glasses, pictures, sofas, chairs, Turkey carpets, etc., adorn the splendid hall; these combined with the sounds of different kinds of music, both European and Indian, played all at the same time in different apartments; the noise of native tom-toms from another part of the house; the hum of human voices; the glittering dresses of the dancing girls, their slow and graceful movements, the rich dresses of the Rajah and his equally opulent Indian guests; gay circle of European ladies and gentlemen…
>
> (Cited in Nevile 2004, p. 39)

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[11] *Kabiwalas* were a class of poets who specialised in the art of mutual jibing in verse. They were patronised by the Great Families in particular.

These new interior trends suited the increasing westernised tastes of the indigenous elite (Tillotson 1989, p.41) and their Great Houses were designed for entertaining on a large scale (see Figure 7.72). *Nautch,*[12] or dances by females were commonly used for both public and private ceremonies. Unlike temple dancers, *nautch* dancers performed to Hindu love songs. Kolkata was said to be the stronghold for *nautch* (Nevile 2004, p.38) and wealthy Bengalis competed with one another by inviting famous *nautch* girls from as far away as Lucknow and Delhi to entertain their European guests, particularly at *durga puja* ceremonies. A photograph from the 1860's (see Figure 7.73) shows a *nautch* in the courtyard of a Delhi mansion. The audience is all male while it can be presumed that four hooded figures watching from the balcony are women of the household.

Figure 7.72. Presumed to be the Andul Palace in its 'hey day'. Courtesy of P.Mitra of the Andul Raj.

The Great Families would send out decorative invitation cards or advertise their *durga pujas* in the local press. If an invitation succeeded in securing the presence of the Governor General or some other dignitary it was seen as a great social victory (Nevile 2004, p. 38). Raja Nabakrishna's courtyard was the setting for many such grand entertainments that included British dignitaries as guests, as mentioned previously in this study. The extravagance of these entertainments has become part of Kolkata's legends. Other entertainments held in the great courtyards included folk theatre (*jatra*), puppet shows (*putulnach*), and poetry competitions (*kabigan*), and these

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[12] *Nautch* was an intricate, traditional Indian dance performed by professional dancing girls.

entertainments were held during the *durga puja* and other Hindu festivals. From the accounts of Fanny Parks (*The Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque 1850),* on festive occasions, particularly the *durga puja*, crowds of Bengali men and Europeans gathered in the homes of the wealthy *babus* (Bhattacharyya 2002).

Figure 7.73. A *nautch* in Delhi during the 1860's. Source, Metcalf 1989, p. 68.

There is little evidence of European music or visual arts being of interest to the Great families until late in the nineteenth century, however European theatre was of interest and as knowledge of English spread Kolkata's intelligentsia read western literature, and some wealthy merchants built up extensive libraries of English books (Marshall 2000, p. 325). By the 1830's the design of the Great Houses, such as the Andul Palace (1834) and the Marble Palace (1835) included ballrooms, billiard rooms and other western signs of what was considered 'fashionable' at the time.

Not only was theatre and dance patronised by Kolkata's wealthy elite but European art was also appreciated and collected by wealthy families who enjoyed or aspired to British style and taste. The steady influx of European paintings, prints and decorative objects in burgeoning colonial cities certainly altered wealth Indians taste and style.

Hindu aristocrats had their portraits painted in European style by both Indian and European artists though the style of these portraits were hybridised (see Figures 7.74,

7.75, 7.76). The close relationships formed with the British allowed the indigenous merchants to observe British decorating styles and social customs. European paintings and prints displayed in Kolkata's public buildings could also have influenced the indigenous elites and their consumption of European art. Over time, many Great Houses became part home, part display, epitomised in the galleries of the Marble Palace which were built specifically to display the Mullick family's large collection of European art.

Left Figure 7.74. Portrait of Babu Khelet Chandra Ghosh, the Palace of Khelet Ghosh. *Middle*. Figure 7.75., portrait of Kali Prasanna Ghosh, in the Palace of Khelet Ghosh, Pathuriaghata in 2007. *Right.* Figure 7.76., western style portrait in the home of the Roys of Bartala in 2005.

Other forms of entertainment were conducted in 'garden houses', some of which were properties on the outskirts of the city, or alternate city mansions in addition to the family home and available to the wealthiest of Bengal's merchants. Some 'garden houses' were built solely for pleasure. Wealthy men could engage in all kinds of activities in their garden houses which included drinking and associating with prostitutes (interview, Sarcar, 2005). Of the many garden houses owned by wealthy Bengalis, Dwarkanath Tagore's 'Belgachia Villa' built in 1823 (see Figure 7.77) was well known among the contemporary Bengali elites as well as Europeans. In this house Tagore was known for his activities of pleasure and indulgence in various entertainments; in contrast his wife, Digambari stayed secluded in the family home and was known for her piety. Many Great Houses featured a specific room decorated for male members of the family and their male friends to meet.

Figure 7.77. Dwarkanath Tagore's Belgachia Villa, in 2005.

These rooms were decorated with a profuse and eclectic array of decorative objects; indeed, the Great Families were avid collectors of what might be regarded as the tasteful and the eccentric (see Figure 7.78 and 7.79). By accessing their private residences, described in Chapter Three of this study, it has been possible to view remaining collections or in many cases, the remnants of collections and artefacts.

Figure 7.78. A sitting room within the home of the Law[13] family in 2005.

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[13] The Laha and Law family are related however choose different spellings and pronunciations of their names.

Figure 7.79. A painting in the sitting room (see Figure 7.77) of the Law family in 2005.

Collections and eclecticism

The Great Families enjoyed spending their enormous wealth making their houses showcases for their conspicuous spending and their eclectic style. By aspiring to part of the colonial elite all things European were collected and displayed, whether or not they were genuinely tasteful in British eyes. In some cases, such as the Marble Palace, collections of European decorative pieces reached seemingly obsessive proportions. These collections eventually outgrew the houses and so items, including paintings, were relegated to hallways, stairways and verandahs. This practice became an accepted form of decorating the Great Houses, creating a surprising, overwhelming display. Verandahs were filled with multiples of the same statues and many of these decorative items were bizarre in their subject matter; sculptures of Napoleon, Jesus and Queen Victoria being popular (see Figures 7.80, 7.81, 7.82, 7.83, 7.84). Light fittings and lamps were used to make an impact and collections of Victoriana and bric-a-brac were housed in display cabinets.

Figure 7.80, *left.* A verandah in the Mullick's Jorosanko home, in 2007. Figure 7.81, *right*, a painting of Queen Alexandria. Source Raulet 1997, p.96.

Left. Figure 7.82, a marble bust of Christ in the home of the Roy's of Bartala in 2005. *Middle.* Figure 7.83, a marble statue of Napoleon in the home of the Mullick's of Jorosanko in 2007. *Right.* Figure 7.84, a life sized lamp in the Law's Great House in 2005.

The walls of a Great House also displayed hunting trophies. Big game hunting was a sport of the rajas and nawabs, the landed gentry, for centuries. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the East India Company had became more entrenched in Bengal, hunting, or *shikar*, became a popular sport for the British as well. The trophy room in the Maheshadal Palace (see Figure 7.85, 7.86, 7.87) and the hunting trophies in the home of Rajah Mookherjee and other homes in Kolkata epitomise the indigenous elite's love of hunting.

Figure 7.85. Trophy room in the Maheshadal Palace in 2007.

Figure 7.86. *Left*, a tiger skin in the home of Rajah Mookherjee in 2005. Figure 7.87.*Right*, elephant tusks in the home of Rajah Mookherjee in 2005.

The interiors and aesthetic qualities of the Great Houses reveal the way European style and western artefacts were introduced to Kolkata as early as the mid-eighteenth century significantly altered the décor and spatial arrangement of elite Bengali households. The new aesthetic ideals of the Great Families and their almost compulsive need to display their wealth through extravagant European furnishings and entertainments created their own taste and style in decoration. In contrast, the plans of the houses reveal the private characteristics of a Great House; the piety of women in segregated areas and the importance of religious observances and the family. Though the Great House featured European artefacts in the public areas, inside the *thakur dalans* and private worship areas the importance of the deity

prevailed. Overall the combination of the traditional and the 'new' dictated the change in form of the interiors of the Great Houses as the nineteenth century progressed. Exterior changes also took place.

Exterior appearances

The architecture of Kolkata's Great Houses of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century focussed on interior spaces, similar in style to pre-colonial architecture. As most daily activities took place in the courtyard, street frontages and façades were not important, nor were the British favoured long impressive driveways and vast areas of land. The Great Families were also not seemingly interested in living in a 'good' neighbourhood, but content to build their residences among lesser buildings, even slums (Evenson 1989, p. 23).

During the nineteenth century however, these attitudes began to change, and the result changed the outward appearance of the Great Houses. Three topics need to be covered in order to understand these changes and the new ways the indigenous elite designed the exteriors of their residences. These ways included:

1. A façade.
2. The idea of a connection with the street.
3. The introduction of spatiality.

By a process addressed in Chapter Four of this study, European architectural styles moved from Kolkata's 'white town' to 'black town' through the business and social relationships that developed between the rulers and the ruled. While Chapter Five described the neo-classical architecture of British Kolkata, Chapter Six showed the ways in which wealthy Indian merchants and landowners absorbed this new European style and sought to emulate it.

The exteriors of Kolkata's mid-eighteenth century indigenous mansions and palaces paid little attention to façades, instead concentrating on interior spaces, particularly the courtyard. Indeed, there was no real concept of what a façade was supposed to be. The rise in European architecture in colonial Kolkata however and the total dismissal of indigenous designs by the British meant that the Indian elite began to re-consider their traditional architecture. Tillotson, in his book, uses an exchange recorded by F.S.

Growse.[14] When an Indian ruler was told that the design for his future European style residence would be more appropriate if built 'in a style more in harmony with national precedent', he answered;

> 'Such designs would be out of harmony with my own more advanced views, which are all in favour of English fashions. The trading classes do well to adhere to Hindustani types, but the landed gentry prefer to range themselves with their rulers'.
>
> (Tillotson 1989, p. 41)

This response reflects the indigenous elite's attitude to both Indian and European architecture. Indian architecture was seen as backward, the Classical as modern. By building a mansion with an impressive façade the Great Families demonstrated that like the British they were modern, wealthy and successful. Britain's building models in India 'westernised' the taste and style of India's elite. Raja Nabakrishna's grandson, Raja Radhakanta Deb, added a European entrance façade to his grandfather's palace, as mentioned in Chapter Six, which included the 'Lion Gate', a direct reference to the British built Government House of 1803, Palladian style twin Ionic columns and a European style loggia. These additions gave the palace a more distinct and impressive street façade (see Figure 7.88).

Figure 7.88. The Palace of Raja Nabakrishna in 2004

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[14] F.S. Growse, Sir Swinton Jacob, R.F.Chisholm and H.Irwin were pioneers of the Indo-Saracenic style of architecture.

It was also important to demonstrate their affinity with European décor and ways of life. Some British found these attempt touching; 'the keen desire this native gentleman displayed to do honour to European tastes by thus expensively furnishing those fine apartments, which neither himself or his family ever occupied…' (Evenson 1989, p. 79). On the other hand, many Europeans took on an air of superiority and were amused at the way Indians sought to copy European taste. An Indian woman recalling her parents who, like many Indians, 'felt it their incumbent duty to prove to Englishmen that they could emulate them to perfection' (Evenson 1989 p. 79

By the nineteenth century Classical style frontages were seen as prestigious. This change is epitomised in the façade of the Marble Palace (1835) (see Figure 7.89). The building's monumental columns and ornate parapet created a façade that still impresses today.

Figure 7.89. The façade of the Mullick's Marble Palace in 2007.

Similar to the Marble Palace, the Khelat Bhavan (*c*.1856) is a large, impressive two-levelled residence built on a narrow street and featuring a dramatic façade. The Khelat Bhavan is named after its founder Khelat Chandra Ghose (1799-1866). The Great House features classical elements including a porch supported by high columns, similar to Corinthian, with capitals topped with a decoration of leaves and scrolls (see Figure 7.89). Projecting dark coloured eaves with caste iron decoration sit on each

side of the entrance porch. According to the family, until a few years ago musicians played at daybreak from these eaves (Bhattacharyya 2002, p.170). This musical display was in the style of the princely courts. Like the Marble Palace, the monumental exterior façade of the Khelat Bhavan is impressive, declaring the wealth and social status of the owner during colonial times and the present day. Khelat Chandra Ghosh grandfather's house is opposite however it was built in the sprawling style of the earlier Great Houses. By building a new, 'modern' house with an outward display of extravagance Ghosh declared his affiliation with the colonial rulers and so became part of north Kolkata's indigenous high society.

Figure 7.90. The Khelat Bhavan in 2007.

The popularity of extravagant façades carried over to the introduction of unusual decorative themes and motifs. A residence owned by the Bose family displays a sitar[15] on the apex of the parapet announcing the owner's interest in music (see Figure 7.91), the façade of the Mullick's Great House features a large clock, indicating the large collection of clocks within (see Figure 7.92), and the meaning behind the hybrid figure atop a north Kolkata parapet remains a mystery to the author (see Figure 7.93).

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[15] A sitar is an Indian musical instrument similar to a guitar.

Figure 7.91. The façade of a Bose family residence, in 2005.

Figure 7.92. The façade of the Mullick's 'Clock House' in 2007.

Figure 7.93. A figure atop a north Kolkata mansion in 2007.

Despite the 'westernisation' of the taste and style of India's elite the plan forms of the Great Houses differed significantly from the British models. The incongruities in the design of many Great Houses can be explained by understanding that the logic of the façade and the logic of the plan were independent of each other (Chattopadhyay 2006, p. 198), (see Figures 7.94 and 7.95). Despite the outward European design of a Great House, the engineers, architects and *munshis* who designed them worked outwards from the courtyard, assembling seemingly separate portions which were then arranged around the courtyard until they formed a whole (Chattopadhyay 2005, p.199). This technique demonstrates the continuance of traditional ways of life within the houses and the subsequent importance of the traditional form.

Figure 7.94. *Left*, the Prasad, in 2005. Figure 7.95 *Right*, the Mullick's 'Clock House', in 2005.

The idea of a connection with the street

The notion of a façade brought about multiple and prominent entrances, grand porticos and carriage ports which made connections between the house and the street, and the interior and exterior spaces (see Figures 7.96 and 7.97). Like the façade, an entrance relating to the street was a British concept which was embraced by the Bengali elite in Kolkata in the beginning of the nineteenth century and clearly demonstrated by the large number of wealthy families who built houses on busy Chitpore Road. In addition the large scale and opulence of these Great Houses built

amongst small residences, shops and bazaars made the houses even more conspicuous, something that was not lost on the attention-seeking wealthy merchant class.
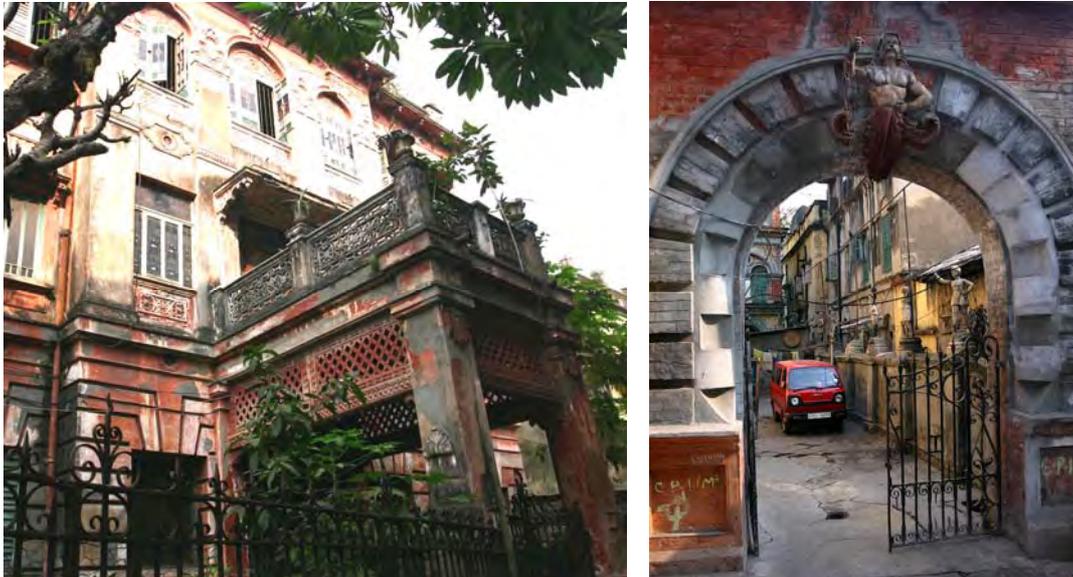
Figure 7.96. *Left*, a grand portico in north Kolkata in 2004. Figure 7.97. *Right*, a carriage port featuring classical statues, in 2005.

In some cases the façades had no relation to the entrances of a Great House, or were changed over the years. Classical façades were designed solely for display, with the real entrances found on the side, or the rear of the building, obscured from the main street. These often hard-to-find entrances to a Great House were designed to deter robbers or the result of physical changes to the building. Numerous additions, changes, multiple doorways and mock façades are confusing, and blur the public and private boundaries of a Great House.

Approaches, porches and the introduction of private gardens

British gardens and attitudes to spatiality changed the outdoor spaces of Kolkata's Great Houses. No building demonstrates British colonial ideas of spatiality more clearly than the Marble Palace, with its impressive entrance gate, circular drive-way; vast grounds, gardens and menagerie (see Figure 7.98 and 7.99). The grounds of a Great House included stables for horses, elephants and detached buildings for horse

drawn carriages and palanquins.[16]When elephants could no longer be kept in the city they were moved to the rural estates and the stables converted into garaging for luxury vehicles (interview, Devi, 2006).
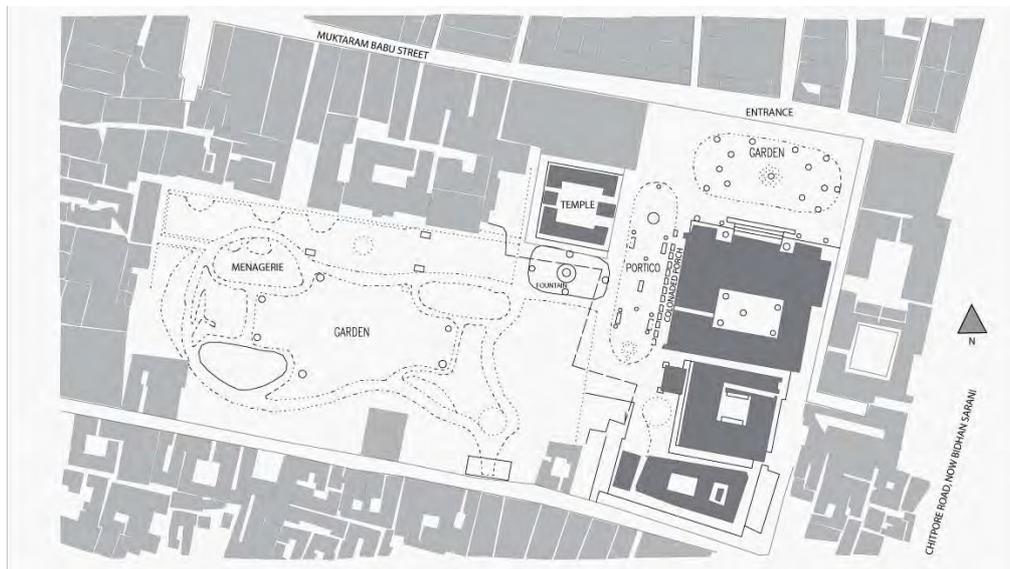
Drawing by Furio Valich of Gordon and Valich, architects.

Figure 7.98. Drawing of the Marble Palace. Source, K.M.C.

Figure 7.99. The grounds of the Marble Palace. Source, Raulet 1997, p.97.

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[16] These palanquins were carriages built for wealthy elites to sit or lie down for journeys carried by their servants. For bathing the whole carriage would be dipped into the river allowing complete privacy.

Britain's preference for open spaces led to a desire among wealthy Bengalis to incorporate extensive gardens to enhance their residences. These gardens were mostly Victorian in style, well laid out, with fountains, flower beds and topiary trees. The introduction of gardens and the servants who maintained them created spaces that symbolised leisurely activities and an abundance of wealth (see Figures 7.100 and 7.101). Gardens were decorated with Victorian garden seats, sculptures and often included a menagerie filled with exotic and rare birds and animals.

Figure 7.100. 'Rajah's Garden', Cossipore, in 2007.

Figure 7.101. Topiary garden at 'Yulebank', the mansion of the Jatri family in 2007.

New ideas of spatiality also led to the building of impressive villas, or garden houses on the outskirts of Kolkata (not all 'garden houses', as mentioned earlier in the chapter, were built for male pleasure). The Kolkata suburb of Garden Reach was once known as an area dotted with mansions built on the rivers edge. Impressive villas belonging to the indigenous aristocracy were also built on Barrackpore and Dum Dum

Roads, the most prominent of which was the Emerald Bower[17] (Campbell 1907), (see Figure 7.102). Owned by Harakumar Tagore, the poet's uncle, the Emerald Bower was surrounded by extensive gardens, avenues, lakes and pavilions and was a showpiece during colonial times. Guests of this beautiful villa included such dignitaries as General Grant and Lady Ripon. A discouraging but somewhat prophetic statement written in 1903 by Oscar Browning in '*Impressions of Indian Travel*,' included;

> The Emerald Bower is worthy of its name and we hope that Indian procrastination will long defer the date when these sacred groves will fall beneath the axe, when it's impressive gloom will be dissipated, when some 'Capability Brown' of India will transform this paradise of loveliness into the trim suburban neatness of a Hampstead or Dulwich (Campbell 1907)

Figure 7.102. The Emerald Bower. Source, Campbell, 1907.

Great Houses built on the banks of the Hooghley River are also examples of the ways in which Kolkata's wealthiest merchants adopted ideas of spatiality. These houses incorporated not only spacious gardens but family temples, riverside pavilions and bathing ghats (see Figures 7.103 and 7.104).

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[17] The Emerald Bower is now a campus of the Barindra Bharati university.

Figure 7.103. *Left,* a riverside palace near Kolkata in 2007. Figure 7.104. *Right*, a private bathing ghat at 'Yulebank',the Jatri family's mansion in 2007.

It was inevitable that European exterior and interior styles would alter or in some cases change the way wealthy Bengalis designed their residences. Great prestige was attached to European style and customs and being up-to-date. Neo-Classicism had created impressive façades and entrances in British Kolkata and the Bengali elite eagerly followed these examples in order not to be left behind. The chapter has also shown that plan forms remained traditional in most cases, particularly in the case of the inclusion of the courtyard. Façades, porticos and carriage entrances which connected the houses with the street gained prominence, yet behind a Classical street facing portico with Corinthian columns there was likely to be a traditional internal courtyard.

The embracing of European architecture by the Indian elite brought with it a change in interior furnishings and consequently a change in their way of life, particularly for the men of the family. As women were segregated, it was the men who had contact with Europeans and so became accustomed to the use of western furniture. In some cases western style furniture was for the comfort of European guests, and rarely used by the family on an everyday basis. In other cases wealthy families embraced western furnishings wholeheartedly. These changes can be explained as a way for the indigenous elite to relate to their colonial rulers; the architectural fashion of the day and to display their wealth to all, grand street frontages being symptomatic of displaying wealth and position.

The descriptions of the grounds and gardens of a Great House show that European ideas of spatiality also became part of the style of a wealthy merchant's home and that

these ideas also leant themselves to making a conspicuous outward impression to both the indigenous and the European population of colonial Kolkata.

Evenson writes in her book that some home-owners saw European styles as a superficial novelty, whereas others who adopted European architectural forms did so to meet a sophisticated range of intellectual interests. Like the English who first used Renaissance classicism, the new styles being used in north Kolkata were associated with 'the cosmopolitan views of a cultural avant-garde' (Evenson 1989, p. 73).

Late nineteenth century politics dramatically and adversely changed the way of life enjoyed by the Great Families, the twentieth century even more so. These changes include momentous and important events such as Partition and Independence. The ways in which the Great Families were involved in these dramatic incidents and the unexpected cost incurred by the families and their Great Houses is the penultimate topic of this thesis. It explains why recent images of the Great Houses are the way they are.

8

THE CHANGES AFFECTING THE GREAT FAMILIES AND THE GREAT HOUSES

The enormous wealth acquired by the Great Families in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was acquired relatively quickly. It allowed them to build mansions, palaces and garden villas, to employ a multitude of servants and purchase vast quantities of interior furnishings and decorations. The families successfully achieved a life that hovered between the traditional Hindu and the new, fascinating European type introduced by colonialism. The family's comfortable, secure way of life began to change during the nineteenth century when political thought and ideas of Independence began to grow. First this change was subtle with the beginning of the movement for a free India but later changed dramatically with Partition and Independence in 1947. With Independence the British quit India and everything changed.

The uppermost reasons for the decline of Kolkata's Great Houses

The reasons are listed below in order of importance. Uppermost was the creation of New Delhi; Partition and Independence, which led to a subsequent decline in revenue. Secondly, legal aspects such as tenancy laws and increased taxes and thirdly, family issues and problems inherent in the old precinct of north Kolkata have all played a role in the decline of the Great Houses:

1. The creation of New Delhi, Partition and Independence
2. The cost of upkeep
3. Legal changes
4. Family issues
5. North Kolkata's problems

The creation of New Delhi, Partition and Independence

An 'illusion of permanence' was necessary for the British to feel safe and comfortable in the colonial outpost of Kolkata (Chattopadhyay 2005, p. 20). Nineteenth century shifts in thinking however, (described in Chapter Four) threatened to disrupt Britain's sense of security. The events of 1857 led to the establishment of the Colonial authorities, British business people and the indigenous elite. The change in status experienced by indigenous elites at the hands of the British, their former patrons, led to feelings of uncertainty and mistrust on both sides of the colonial spectrum, leading to the British looking at ways to re-establish their influential position.

This loss in prestige established an interest in the blossoming Independence Movement[18] amongst the indigenous elite. It was always stronger in Kolkata than the rest of India. The movement courted the Great Families who gradually became involved. Soon political rallies and speeches by famous and influential thinkers of the day were being held in the courtyards of the Great Houses at the expense of the wealthy merchants, some of who now saw themselves as 'freedom fighters' (interview, Basu, 2004). The disintegration of their relationship with the British was replaced by the respect they received from the members of the Independence Movement. The wealthy merchants, the famous '*Babus* of Kolkata' chose Independence from the very people that had enabled them to attain their wealth and position. Ironically it led to their downfall.

As British rule depended on maintaining control, their indigenous ally's involvement in the Independence Movement became a contributing factor to Britain looking towards Delhi, for a possible new capital. By turning their back on Kolkata the British were leaving a growing discontent[19] that held the possibility of escalating.

The decision to move the capital from Kolkata was announced at the 1911 Durbar in Delhi. The city of Kolkata however had already suffered at the beginning of the twentieth century with the partition of Bengal on communal grounds on October 16th

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[18] The growing Indian freedom movement was a political rather than a social revolution. Its aim was to transfer power from foreign rulers to the native classes (Mitter, 1994).

[19] Kolkata's eastern location was another eventual reason for the British decision to move to Delhi. By choosing Delhi as the new capital, the British had the opportunity to build on the ancient grandeur of the late Mughal Empire.

1905 (Lord Curzon's role as the Viceroy ended on 18th November the same year). The subsequent widespread unrest gave birth to the rise of the *swadeshi* movement, or ban on British goods and though protests led to the annulment of this partition, it was the beginning of social and political unrest in Kolkata. Despite rumours about the move for many years before, the announcement created uproar of protest in Kolkata, particularly from the business organisations. The city's status as the capital of British India had ended and the Great Families would suffer a loss of esteem and a rapid decline in business (Evenson 1989, p. 94). It was only when the capital of British India was finally removed from Kolkata to Delhi in 1912, that the government could enjoy relative peace.

With these events, Bengal became a marginalised state, heralding the decline that has been continuing to this day. The move to Delhi left Kolkata empty of its lifeblood: British trade. Kolkata had lost its primacy and the Great Families were now 'Great' in name only. Chattopadyay believes, however, that political problems did not begin in the early twentieth century, nor even in the late nineteenth century, but rather in an earlier era when Kolkata became populated by a growing Bengali middle class (Chattopadhyay 2005, p. 19). The time is difficult to pinpoint but occurred somewhere in the first three decades of the nineteenth century, and that the decision to move the capital of British India from Kolkata to New Delhi in 1911 was a result of Kolkata's political climate even then. The 1905 partition of Bengal being considered the 'cause' and the Raj in Delhi the 'effect' (Chattopadhyay 2005, p. 19).

As Kolkata's population grew larger, social problems became more insistent, as did demands for home rule for India. Communal riots occurred in 1926, when Mahatma Gandhi called for non-compliance with unjust laws, and riots occurred in 1930. In World War II, Japanese air raids upon the Kolkata docks caused some damage. During the Bengal famine of 1943, millions of Indians starved to death as food was diverted to feed Allied troops. The most serious communal riots of all however, took place in 1946, when the partition of British India became imminent and tensions between Muslims and Hindus reached their peak.

Partition at Independence in 1947 was the final blow for Kolkata and the city paid the highest price of any Indian city. As the country was divided the city lost its natural hinterland in East Bengal and millions of refugees had to be accepted and assimilated.

With Partition, Kolkata was the capital of West Bengal only, losing the trade of a large part of its former hinterland. At the same time, an estimated three million people fled from East Pakistan to West Bengal, with seven hundred thousand inundating the city of Kolkata, the result of which became the sight of homeless people camping on the street. This process was repeated when Bangladesh was created in the midst of violence in 1971.

Independence, though inevitable, had a bitter outcome for Kolkata's Great Families. Their situation changed dramatically for the worse. The British who had given them power and wealth had gone, and ironically, many Great Families did not foresee how this would eventually affect their lives. Their confidence in their power and positions within the hierarchy of society meant that many had continued to spend lavishly without consolidating their fortunes. Ranjit Mitra feels the founders of the Great Houses of Kolkata didn't acquire *enough* land to save themselves, unlike the northern rajahs, who are still relatively wealthy with enough money to invest in restoration and conversion (interview, Professor Ranjit Mitra, 2005).

The Bengali elite reacted in many different ways to their dramatic change in fortune. Many were drawn to the nationalist movement where they could at least survive with honour. Some supplemented their declining incomes by seeking alternate livelihoods, however many could not withstand the political, economic and social changes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After Independence the remaining landed gentry with large holdings were forced to relinquish their estates to the new government. Many privately owned lands became part of the new nation , as in the case of the Burdwan Raj mentioned previously in this study, whose vast estates were requisitioned, or 'gifted' to the new government.

The cost of upkeep

The once powerful *zamindars* who were the mainstay of British revenue administration in Bengal and the wealthy merchants who were the trading partners of the British in Kolkata could not withstand the late nineteenth century changes in economy and society. After Independence the landowning Bengali elite were offered compensation (not a 'privy purse' as in northern Indian states), usually far below the value of the properties. Different families reached different agreements with the

government at varying stages after Independence, and these delays and amounts often depended on their wealth, position, their former relationships with the British and their new relationship with the Indian government. The loss of revenue experienced by the Great Families in comparison to the income during colonial times made it difficult to maintain their large residences and the compensation offered along with an increase in salaries made it impossible to employ the large retinue of servants needed to maintain a Great House or to live in the lavish manner the Families had become accustomed to. In some instances a Great House has been abandoned or sold to developers. In many cases, such as the Andul Palace, and the Basu Palace, rooms were simply closed off or tenanted out, a strategy that has intrinsic problems in West Bengal, where rents are controlled.

Legal changes

The Rent Control Act was put in place by the Indian Government to provide fair payment of rent to landlords and protect tenants against exploitation or eviction. The Act is not without problems however. Tenants residing in rental properties in India since 1947 continue to pay the same rent, fixed at that time, irrespective of inflation or a change in real estate values and further, tenants cannot be removed from a house even if they refuse to pay rent. This discrepancy in the law has resulted in many Great Houses becoming over-run with tenants who live in untidy and unsanitary conditions with no regard for the property. Needless to say home owners feel helpless, with no confidence in restoring or maintaining their properties even if they could afford to do so (interview, Nathany, 2005).

Furthermore, high taxes present a major difficulty for the aristocratic families wanting to keep a Great House. As Kolkata's aristocrats are sentimentally attached to their Great Houses they strive to pay the high taxes regardless of the hardship involved. Many feel the honourable men who worked hard for Independence were tired from the struggle and replaced by a new government with 'no morals, and whose high taxes affected the honest and law abiding citizens' (interview, Mookherjee, 2005).

Family issues

Sentimental attachment to an ancestral home is not always shared by all members of a large family. The joint family was not always a happy community, and domestic feuds were a rather common occurrence within old established families in and around Kolkata. Once the original family house proved too small, family decisions on what to do with the home created bitterness, developing into expensive litigation that in many cases carried on for decades and ate into the family fortunes. Complicated family titles and confusing trust funds added to tensions. Continued litigation is often the reason a Great House still stands. Inaction due to family disputes has affected the condition of the Great Houses however, and for many buildings it is already too late.

A Great House is important as it is the residence of the family deity. In most cases there is a trust fund for the deity, often the only income remaining. Older family members seek to keep the ancestral home for the deity however, though deity worship and religion was taken very seriously by the Great Families, it is not as relevant today. 'Younger family members are not as concerned about traditional and religious matters, life has changed' (interview, Partha Ghosh, 2005).

Many families have divided their properties amongst their heirs, building internal walls to create multiple private residences within a Great House (in the case of the Basu Palace). There is pressure, on those who value the houses, from developers and also from family members who want to sell. The families are burdened with having to maintain these 'white elephants that have become a liability to own' (interview, Chakraborty, 2003). Often owners feel it is cheaper to let their ancestral home deteriorate, adding to the problems of an already declining north Kolkata.

North Kolkata 's problems

The colonial port city of Kolkata followed a longitudinal development pattern along the contours of the river. Today, this pattern has created intolerable traffic congestion. Development has focussed on the interior, away from the river, with areas such as Salt Lake City, rather than tackling the difficult task of upgrading north Kolkata. This policy has increasingly isolated the area. In addition the agonising poverty due to the lack of employment and overcrowding (also suffered by the vast majority of the

population) as well as civil neglect has made the area polluted and unsanitary. Once considered a desirable place to live, north Kolkata is now neglected, and for many citizens there is now no reason to go there unless to visit family members. The frustration residents experience is clear in the following article titled; 'Road mess in North', published in 2005 reveals;

> Driving on the roads of north Calcutta is a nightmare. The roads to Bowbazar area such as College Street, Amherst Road, MG Road, Chitpur Road, Rabindra Sarani and Beadon Street are some of the most potholed ones. Usually Durga Puja is the only time when these roads get a facelift. This year we were denied this little consolation too. Tramlines are also a major cause for the sorry state of the roads. While the Corporation maintains that the Calcutta Railways Company is responsible for the repair of roads with tram tracks, the latter pleads lack of funds. The CPM wanted to remove the tramlines, but the Congress opposed the idea. While authorities are paying attention to the roads in south, the north is being sadly neglected. Is it because VIP's don't ply on these stone cobbled streets? And those VIP's who do stay in North Calcutta appear to be hapless on the issue. Being a doctor, I am concerned about the trouble patients face while travelling on these roads. Residents of north Calcutta should raise their voices.

> (An article from *The Telegraph*, Kolkata, 2005)

There is little to prevent the continuing decay and poor maintenance of the north Kolkata area. The city has grown to become one of the largest in the world with a teeming population, and a high demand for available space. The decline of the Great Houses can be said to parallel the decline of the north Kolkata, exemplifying the city's disinterest in this old precinct and the history embedded there.

Today, many Great Houses are in a bad way; approached via lanes strewn with rubbish; covered with trees and vines growing both inside and out and uncared for by large numbers of tenants who come and go. In colonial times, the Great Families had a certain jurisdiction over north Kolkata's civic amenities, but as they declined in power and status civic neglect began to rise (see Figures 8.1, 8.2). With this visual evidence it would seem the city's Great Houses have been forgotten. The Palace of Raja Nabakrishna (discussed earlier in this study) is an important part of the city's history and listed as a heritage building by the K.M.C. and Intach, yet the building suffers from severe degradation. Remaining stonewalls are broken, overgrown with

vegetation and small hutments cling to the ruined walls. A sign declaring the building a 'restoration project' is an incongruous sight (see Figures 8.3, 8.4, 8.5).

Figure 8.1. The Belgachia Villa in 2005.

Figure 8.2. Civil neglect in north Kolkata, in 2005.

Figure 8.3. *Left*. Exterior walls of Raja Nabakrishna's Palace in 2004. Figure 8.4. *Right*. Restoration sign, Palace of Nabakrishna in 2006.
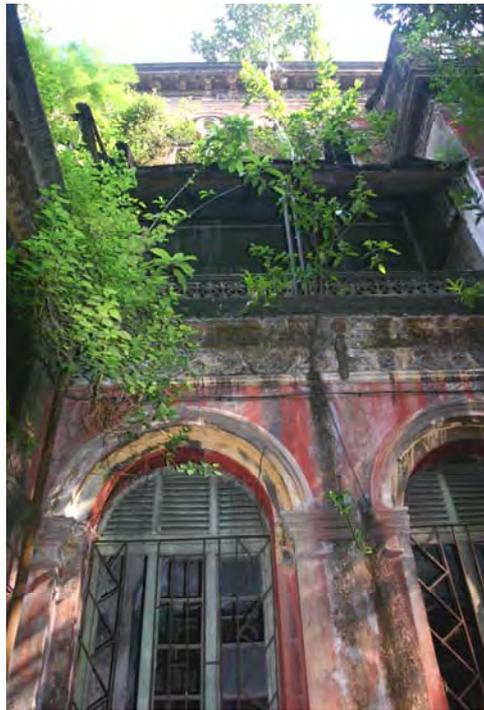
Figure 8.5. A north Kolkata mansion, in 2007.

While this chapter has discussed the changes that affected the Great Houses, the following chapter uses interviews with Kolkata's Great Families to describe how these changes have affected the Great Families in the twenty first century and how these aristocrats see their positions today. Further, the chapter looks at contemporary ideas of heritage and conservation which impact on the condition of the Great Houses.

9

THE RELEVANCE OF THE GREAT HOUSES IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

The position of the Great Families today is difficult and paradoxical. Many Bengalis feel that the *zamindars* took their grand way of life for granted, with no thought to their future or consolidation of their wealth. Education was not a strong concern with the landed gentry of Bengal during the days of the wealthy *zamindaris.* Similarly, the new urban elite, the merchants of mid to late-eighteenth century Kolkata, were too occupied with trade, and were more an economic elite than an intellectual one. Both spent their money on buying land, holding *nautches*, building temples and lavishly carrying out familial and religious obligations. However as the political situation began to change, some forward thinking elites recognised the need to establish other ways to secure the family's position. Interviews for this study revealed that the families who diversified their assets or studied for professions have been more successful in maintaining their ancestral homes. Despite their loss of power and wealth many still endeavour to preserve the memories of their past, while others have adapted to a more modern way of life. This chapter focuses on two topics; firstly, how former Great Families see their position today and secondly, the kinds of heritage and conservation efforts that are in place to help maintain these heritage residences in the twenty first century.

How Kolkata's aristocrats see their position today

Are the aristocratic families who manage to retain their ancestral Great Houses trying to hold onto whatever is left of a glorious past or are they trapped in a 'white elephant' that is too costly to restore and too antiquated to live in comfortably? Are their Great Houses seen today as grand symbols of Bengali entrepreneurship or symbols of oppression or economic liabilities?

For the people of Kolkata there is a complex love-hate relationship with their former indigenous elite. Many have a real affection, familiarity and love for the sites of the Great Houses, fondly recalling playing in the labyrinthine houses as children. Many older Kolkattans enjoy relating the stories and legends of the opulence and extravagances of the Great Families, which far outdid any British extravagances of the day. On the other hand, many also feel the lifestyles and homes of the great merchants were simply too opulent and wasteful and that the Great Houses symbolise feudal oppression at its worst. Some members of the younger generation would rather not be identified as descendents of former elites and *zamindars,* as many treated their peasants cruelly. Some socialists and political leaders have a long standing resentment against wealth which is propagated but ironically, both of these groups can also demonstrate pride in having aristocratic ancestors. The media still refer to their now impoverished former indigenous rulers as 'aristocrats'. These paradoxical attitudes are complex and as many and varied as the experiences of the aristocratic families who continue to stay in their ancestral homes.

Partha Ghose relates how Independence and Partition affected his family, who were part of the landed gentry of Bengal. Ghose feels today that his family's experiences resulted in his opinion that owning a *zamindari* was an 'adverse profession'. Most *zamindaris* were in East Bengal, including the lands of the Ghose family. When Independence split Bengal the family's lands were confiscated by East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Some *zamindari* families were compensated and some, like Ghose's were not. The fortunate families who were still had difficulties in receiving their compensation.

The Ghose family moved to Rainey Park in 1962 (see Figure 9.1) when they found north Kolkata was becoming too congested. Partha maintains it has been the case for decades that 'if one wants to live in a better locality one must move to the south of the city'. Patha Ghose's father responded to the family's change in fortune by studying for an economics and law degree in London, and establishing a practice in Kolkata, which secured the family financially (interview, Ghose 2005).

Figure 9.1. *Left* the residence of Partha Ghose in 2005. *Right*, a sitting room, the home of Patha Ghose in 2005.

Raja Nabakrishna Deb is an important figure in indigenous and British Kolkata's history. Today the raja's descendents live in small residences nearby however they work to raise funds in order to simply keep their ancestral home. This loyalty is from a certain pride in Nabakrishna's achievements and the knowledge that the palace is an important part of Kolkata's history.

Funds are raised mainly by renting out the large courtyard of the palace for political and commercial events and by using the theatre-like *natmandir* for cultural evenings where traditional music and dancing is performed. Money raised at these events is not enough to restore the building. The former garden fronting the *natmandir* has been rented to the K.M.C. to be used as a car park. Probal Deb, Nabakrishna's descendent, maintains that despite the family lobbying for sixteen years no funds have been made available for restoration or maintenance of their famous ancestor's palace (interview, Deb, 2004).

In a similar position, the Basu family has great pride in their Bagbazar palace but find it impossible to maintain, let alone restore. Consequently the family has rented part of the house and given many artefacts to the K.M.C. in the hope that the government may restore part of the building and maintain their heritage treasures, something that now seems increasingly impossible to achieve with private funds. At the time of writing the K.M.C. are using their section of the palace as offices, and no restoration has begun. The *Basu Bari's* grand courtyard is regularly rented out for weddings and the Basu's live, as described in Chapter Six, in a 'new' house in the grounds of the palace built some thirty-five years ago.

The gardens of the Burdwan Palace are also used as a venue for weddings however, like the previous houses, this occasional revenue is not enough to restore the building to its former glory. Like the Ghose family, a major part of the Burdwan lands came within the jurisdiction of East Pakistan. With Partition, the East Pakistan Government asked the Burdwan Raj to join them but the family decided to stay in India, not foreseeing what would happen in the future. When the Independent Indian Government began confiscating rural estates in 1958 (despite protests and long disputes) the Maharajah of Burdwan was forced to begin selling up the Burdwan lands. He was devastated: 'How can Burdwan be taken away from us, we have been here for five hundred of years!' (interview, Devi, 2004).

The Burdwan Raj was at one time the greatest landowner in Bengal and the family supported the colonial rulers and aligned themselves completely with the British and their way of life. The money offered by the Independent Indian Government for the vast Burdwan holdings, which included as many as ten palaces, was, according to the family, well below the market value. Instead the Maharajah donated his property in Burdwan to be used as a university.

The Maharajah of Burdwan's grand daughter, who uses the title, 'Princess Karuna Devi of the Burdwan Raj', is philosophical about her family's loss and resigned to the dramatic changes that they have experienced. She explains that the family 'didn't have business acumen' and 'were bought up for no other way of life than that of being part of the ruling class.' Devi is the only family member remaining in the Burdwan Palace in Alipore (see Figure 9.2 and 9.3). Her apartments are comfortably decorated but the rest of the palace is empty. Devi recalls the palace's hey day when British visitors included the British Viceroys of the day, 'what else could we do, the British were the rulers!' At the time of writing there are plans to develop the palace and remaining gardens into apartments. Devi feels the remaining Burdwans will leave Kolkata eventually but 'where would they go, this is the only place they know'.

Figure 9.2. *Left*, Karuna Devi, the Burdwan Palace in 2005. Figure 9.3. *Right*, image of the Maharajah of Burdwan, the Burdwan Palace in 2005.

The experiences of the ancient Narajol Raj were similar to the Burdwans. Their Gope Palace on forty four acres (17.8 hectares) of land in Midnapur was donated to the government in 1957 on the premise it would be used for education. Today it is the 'Raja Narendra Lal Khan Women's College'. The family (see Figure 9.4) live in 'Narajol House', a large, British style 'bungalow in south Kolkata. Descendent Pradeep Ghose explains that the older generation have many regrets about losing their lands, but the younger generation, like Pradeep, think 'it is god's will' (interview, P.Ghose 2005).

Figure 9.4. Pradeep Ghose and son in 2005.

The experiences of non-urban indigenous rulers can vary from their city counterparts. Many villages flourished during the first part of the nineteenth century, particularly if residents had business associations with the British. When those residents stayed in their ancestral villages they amalgamated their wealth within village society and kept up traditional social values. This gained them a high level of respect.

The Andul Raj remained with their ancestral village of Andul, thirty kilometres from Kolkata. Pradeep Mitra speaks of the 'adulation' he receives from the people of Andul. Mitra is an advocate with the High Court of India and lives with his family in the enormous Andul Palace. He recalls that during British rule there were always enough funds to maintain the family's hundred room palace. However, today the building is in a severe case of deterioration (see Figures 9.5 and 9.6). Furthermore, despite the historic palace being declared a heritage site in 1990 no funds for maintenance and repair have been made available. Mitra cannot afford to restore the impressive building, instead renting most of the palace to strangers.
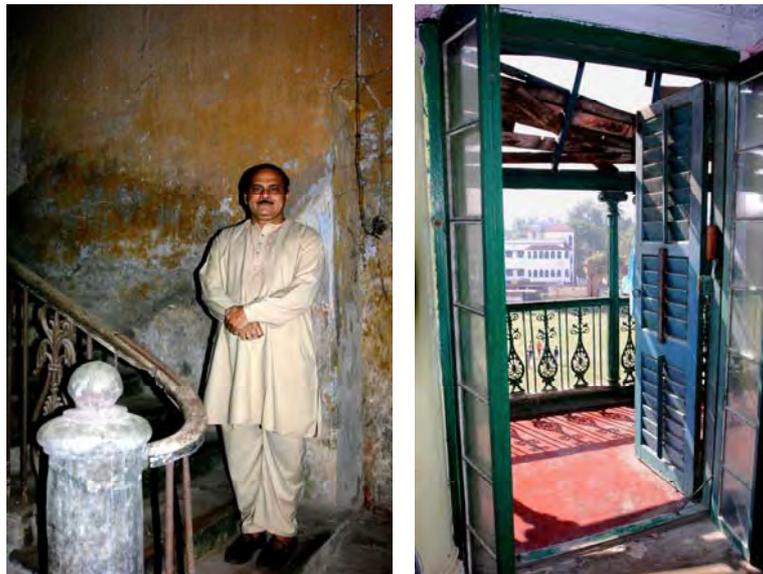
Figure 9.5. *Left*, Pradeep Mitra of the Andul Raj in 2004. Figure 9.6. *Right*, balcony of the Andul Palace in 2004.

Mitra feels today's government of West Bengal have the funds for the restoration of historic properties but has no desire to help the landed gentry, despite their severely reduced circumstances and the condition of their heritage homes. The Mitras (see Figures 9.7, 9.8) who live in just a few remote rooms of the palace hope that someone will make an offer to take over the palace and restore it. In comparison to the lack of

regard that aristocrats in the city experience, Mitra certainly enjoys a large amount of respect. When interviewing Mitra for this study various residents stopped him as we walked through the village. They included a local politician, an artist and various shopkeepers and friends who seemed genuinely pleased to see him and share some time in conversation. Mitra is still seen as the local raja and is asked to preside over weddings and local committees, however, he stresses, 'that is where the glamour ends' (Taylor, 2006, p.95).

Figure 9.7. *Left,* the Mitra family in 2004. Figure 9.8. *Right*, a sitting room, the Andul Palace in 2004.

These memories of Kolkata's former indigenous elites shine light on their personal experiences of colonial rule and post colonial Independence. The changes affecting the Great Families discussed in this chapter have shown the many ways in which a major indigenous class who collaborated with the British colonial system, failed to be the ultimate beneficiary of that system.

Heritage and conservation in Kolkata

> 'There is a building along Ballygunge Road built by the Choudhuries, a lovely building. They built a wall so now you can only see the top of it opposite the science college. We declared it a heritage building, but it belongs to a gentleman who desperately needs to sell it, but he can't sell it because it's a heritage building under our present state, which we need to think about and reconsider. So now it is being de-listed. I have talked about this before. I am a member of the Regional Kolkata Municipal Corporation Committee, the Heritage Building Committee. Nothing happens. Our heritage consists in listing buildings. I see no vision for a better future for our heritage buildings…' Professor Barun De's lecture, July 2007

Vibha Kumar writes of the steel, glass and concrete buildings of India's skyline which tell of India's tryst with modernity. India's transition into an economic powerhouse and important global player have reached new heights literally and metaphorically, yet, despite this success, Vibha Kumar asks; 'how does India view her past and what stories do her heritage buildings tell?' (see Figure 9.9), (Kumar, 2006, p. 40).

Figure 9.9. The Andul Palace (1834) in 2005.

Until recently, West Bengal's Marxist government has seen the preservation of historical sites as a priority of the West, and something Indians are not much bothered about. Some see heritage and conservation as a luxury only for wealthy countries. Economically, West Bengal has long struggled compared with the rest of India and the government has been reluctant to accept foreign capital. However, in 2004, Mr. Suma Chakrabarti, the permanent secretary of the British government's Department for International Development (D.F.I.D.) announced that the West Bengal minister had informed him that the Left Front government was committed to reforms and that D.F.I.D.'s massive grants for the state's development were welcome. However and understandably, this support will first be for pro-poor welfare projects and areas such as environment, primary education, and help for the urban poor and public sector enterprise projects. Heritage preservation is left to heritage organisations and the public (*The Statesman*, Kolkata, 2004). It is probable that West Bengal has heritage buildings spread across the state and that no one has an indication on the exact number of such buildings.

Tamal Sengupta believes the city is at a loss to keep tabs on heritage buildings due to 'the failure of West Bengal Heritage Commission (W.B.H.C.) in preparing a comprehensive list of heritage buildings and sites, and this failure due in particular to the non co-operation of civic bodies reluctant to give out names'. In response W.B.H.C. chairman and former Union education minister Pratap Chandra Chunder said the commission does not receive enough from the Union government in the form of a grant to run the commission; 'It is difficult to maintain and repair the heritage structures with this paltry amount. The Union government could probably look into the issue and raise grants for better functioning of the commission' (Sengupta, in *The Economic Times*, Sunday, 11th June, 2006).

In the 1980's a committee was set up by the Government of West Bengal to identify heritage sites. Though begun with the best intentions it began to fade, particularly after the media became critical, subsequently, it closed completely. In 1997 it was revived and Professor De was made chairman. The committee listed houses where 'elements of history' had taken place, but 'a lot more needed to be accomplished'. Over the next three years nothing further was done, and the whole project came to a standstill. Professor De believes the interests of developers and promoters are the real reasons behind the lack of progress. Understandably reasons such as these make conservation difficult to achieve. On a broader level, Professor De feels the character and heritage of his city is being 'eroded' by the Marwari community, whose large scale developments involve the buying up of properties of which they have 'no concern or passion for their history or heritage'(interview, Professor De, Kolkata, 2005). The Marwari community's conspicuous success in business, through these modern developments, has made them a target for Bengali discontent.

The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (Intach) began documenting the Great Houses in 1988 and acknowledges that it is now impossible to know even approximately how many Great Houses existed. Ninima Debla, a historian and researcher employed by Intach estimates there could have been as many as two hundred and eighty mansions and palaces but admits that 'many mistakes and discrepancies' were made in the documenting process during the early days. The organisation also found that photographs of the original buildings were 'very hard to find' (interview, Debla, Nov 2005). Today's heritage list includes approximately

thirty buildings, which could be classified as Great Houses. Intach works at a national level to attract private support for preservation, describing itself as a 'culture bank' by offering technical and financial support.

The hope that preservation could become a fashionable cause, as it is in some countries, has been diminished by questions about the organisation's achievements. Intach's heritage awareness projects are patronised by the fashionable and wealthy in Kolkata, however, the extent of revenue from these events is minimal. Intach's conservation division restore artefacts and paintings, but their numbers are small, and they need more specialised equipment and training. Press coverage of Intach events is wide, which does achieve an awareness of heritage issues. Evenson sums up the difficulty in the area of conservation in India by citing an article in an Indian architectural journal which states; 'dealing with the forces which are really destroying our heritage…conservation, we cannot help thinking, will take second place to political considerations and personal whims (Evenson 1989, p. 267).

Evenson includes Charles Correa's argument in her book; that Indians need to develop a sense of concern for their environment, adding that the problem is based on generations of apathy, and a metaphysical indifference to the environment. He poses a theory that unlike the Italians who have also known poverty, the Indians lack sufficient hedonism to create a pleasant environment. Evenson agrees, writing that one does not need to look closely to find neglect, even in expensive, luxurious buildings and an overall indifference to the physical world (Evenson, 1989, p. 267).

At the time of writing the K.M.C. deems that owners of heritage buildings are responsible for their conservation. They see their role more as conservers of public properties such as the Metropolitan Building and Metcalfe Hall however they point out that conservation architects are available to give advice to owners of private properties. Concerned private owners must however, have their proposals passed through the K.M.C. regarding heritage buildings or premises, which can be time consuming. The K.M.C. also has a Heritage Committee, and has established a system for the grading of heritage buildings according to their significance. In 2003, the K.M.C. stated that specific efforts had been made by government departments, both state and central, to preserve Kolkata's colonial architecture. Up to date this has involved newly digitalised maps of the city where the footprints of the Great Houses

can be found, and in separate hard copy folders their condition, approximate age and known details have been previously documented. The municipal architect explains the difficulties, citing a lack of funds from all areas as 'the heritage organisations do not help, the government does not help, so it is left to the home owners, who are impoverished or have taken on regular jobs just to make ends meet, or rent out the buildings and so they continue to decline' (interview, Anundo Karforna, KMC, 2004).

Kolkata's Government heritage website states under 'Residential Houses' that some old residential houses belonging to the urban elites are part of the city's heritage but are also 'probably the worst examples of destruction of heritage' and further, 'unless responsible bodies take charge they will probably be demolished by developers'. It is clear that in many areas of society there is regret that the historic Great Houses are being marginalised. Newspaper articles such as the one below, regularly report the latest house to come under the developer's hammers or the newest high rise block to obstruct a famous landmark building that relates to the mercantile history of the city:

> The red house at 96 Raja Rammohan Sarani …probably constructed during the turn of the 19th century. It belonged to Hrishikesh Laha (1852-1935) a Bengali businessman and philanthropist who specialised in export/import and was once the Sheriff of Calcutta besides being the president of the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce for 26 years. Like his father, Durgacharan Laha, the title of raja was bestowed on him in 1913 for his philanthropy.
> The residence was in keeping with his standard in life and the ambience of the old neighbourhood but it may not be visible any longer…a new building is reportedly being constructed in front and the house will be hidden. A small sign 'under possession of city construction' written on it says it all. A building has already come up behind the Laha house and it had been reported leased out since 1969…now it will be eclipsed by a block of flats (cited in *The Kolkata Telegraph*, 2004).

Organisations like Intach and 'Heritage Calcutta' feel the community can play a more direct role in determining the future of Kolkata's heritage and there are efforts afoot to educate the public about the significance of historic structures. However, there is also a popular perception that conservation is an elitist issue. The efforts being made towards minimising these perceptions are especially difficult in a multi-cultural, segmented society like India's. In addition is the economic factor in a country where starvation deaths are common. Conservation today is a specialised task and to allow a budget for heritage conservation would seem frivolous to many.

Heritage architect Manish Chakravorty of the Kolkata-based Non Government Organisation (N.G.O.) Action Research in Conservation and Heritage (A.R.C.H.), feels the role of the state or municipality is to take care of the surroundings, but admits that 'heritage conservation is a relatively new idea'. He remains optimistic that careful conservation is possible with increased awareness and active community participation (*Deccan Herald*, December, 21, 2003). Chakravorty conducted a study of the feasibility of conserving various structures in Dalhousie Square, which was funded by the Bangalore based India Foundation for the Arts (I.F.A.). By initiating the process of bringing attention to the sorry state of the British designed square resulted in having Kolkata's British built Dalhousie Square recognised as a World Heritage Site.

Efforts are now under way to preserve and restore the various structures within the square. For an organisation such as the I.F.A. to fund a project to help Kolkata's Indian-built Great Houses would seem difficult. First, the degree of degradation is extreme in many cases and costs would be high, and secondly as most of the remaining houses are owned by large families it is difficult to reach an agreement on what should be done. Fortunately a number of Great Houses are still owned privately and reasonably well maintained. These buildings are especially important as they give a valuable historical and social insight into the way of life these wealthy merchants enjoyed, while at the same time showing ways in which the buildings can be conserved.

Many palaces of northern India have been saved by tourism, which has had a marked influence on the more travelled areas of India. Popular tourist destinations include old forts, palaces and *havelis*,[20] which have been converted into hotels. Though tourism is undeveloped in Kolkata, it is still a valid possibility. As tourists seek the 'authentic' India of their romantic dreams; palaces, pavilions and the trappings of the colonial empire some see this as a backward step for Indian architecture, however, tourism does offer the chance for restoration of a high standard, both functionally and aesthetically and these modernised buildings are enjoyed just as much by middle class Indians as they are by tourists from other countries. Although the area of north

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[20] The *haveli* is the earlier northern equivalent of Kolkata's rajbaris or courtyard style houses.

Kolkata is devoid of the usual pleasant infrastructure expected by tourists, tours to a number of privately owned Great Houses, no matter what their condition, would be fascinating for many western visitors and would show another side to the city of Kolkata, as well as providing a source of income for maintenance and restoration.

In colonial times, the British were concerned with making money and returning to Britain as soon as they were successful. Similarly, many Indian inhabitants also saw early Kolkata as a temporary residence in which to make ones fortune and then return to their ancestral village. Subsequently, the British criticised Indians for their reluctance to support civic improvements. In response the Indians maintained the city's revenue was used principally on improving the British districts of colonial Kolkata. In 1857, a report of the Commissioners for the Improvement of the Town of Calcutta declared that funds were employed 'to the open prejudice of the native town' (Evenson, 1989, p. 28). From this report it would seem that very little has changed from colonial times, a conclusion justified by V.S. Naipaul's statement in 2004 that residents of Kolkata 'must like civic neglect, otherwise you would do something about it' (speech by V.S. Naipaul, The Oxford Bookshop, Park Street, Kolkata, 2004).

Bach asks the question of why Kolkata cannot maintain its heritage buildings like Bangalore or Mysore, two cities he feels are exemplary in terms of similar value and under publicised urban fabric. Although Bach accepts that efforts have been made, though 'mainly in coats of paint' he believes answers are bound up in an impossibly complex sphere of mindsets which include politics, protocol and unknown factors; part of a 'twelve million minded personality'(Bach, 2006, p.27). Be that as it may, there are a number of houses that have been transformed and utilised in new, functional and successful ways. Examples include the National Institute of Science on A.P.C. Road (see Figures 9.10 and 9.11), previously the Basu Bidyan Mandir and at one time the home of wealthy trader Loken Palit (interview, Sarcar, 2005) and the house of the Tagores, now used as a museum and a college of the arts.

Figure 9.10. The National Institute of Science, in 2005.

Figure 9.11. The House of the Tagores, Jorosanko, in 2005.

At the time of writing it would seem this northern precinct of Kolkata is destined to retain its chaotic form and the Great Houses remain hidden and deteriorating within its lanes. As Evenson writes, the longevity of a building is dependent on chance and its continued usefulness. With this in mind it would seem that old mansions and palaces in north Kolkata would be more vulnerable than most. It is pleasing to know that a number of Kolkata's Great Houses shown in this study still exist in reasonably good, original condition.

10

CONCLUSION

In the memory of dwelling resides the house. One day when its
residents leave, the house dies a real death. Entering the realm of
archaeology, it informs us whether it is built in an indigenous or
foreign mode, in a Mughal or Buddhist style. Then one day the poet
and the artist arrive. They generate new life into the house and its
catalogued artefacts by rescuing it from the mortuary of history and
archaeology. Abanindranath Tagore.

(cited in Chattopadhyay 2005, p. 175)

This thesis has described the complex reasons behind the architectural planning and
style of the Great Houses of Kolkata. Their opulence amid the chaotic streets and
lanes of north Kolkata is surprising even today and serve as a reminder of the area's
former character and the vast wealth and extravagance of the Bengali entrepreneurs
who founded the Great Families and built their Great Houses.

The new social structure brought about by colonialism created a new class in Kolkata
who had enough wealth to seek to have their aspirations met. This study has traced the
Great Families emergence, their colonial experiences, and has examined the
architectural style that developed as a consequence. Their Great Houses are a
testimony to the families' fascination with the new foreign culture imposed by British
colonialism.

The Great Houses are not architecturally pure, which is a factor in their dismissal as
uninteresting or kitsch by many European and Indian architectural historians. They
are however, historically interesting and the result of an amalgamation of two
traditions. They were developed over two hundred years of direct contact between the
indigenous people and the British and should be understood as such. The houses also
offer an insight into the way of life of Bengal's merchant class which had a profound
impact on the broader indigenous culture and society during the mid-eighteenth to

mid-nineteenth centuries. For the city of Kolkata today, they are an important connection between the past and the present. However, incongruously as the study has shown, many are now examples of the destruction of heritage.

Despite the British architectural models available in Kolkata during the colonial period the exteriors of the Great Houses are hybrid in design and eclectic in decoration, which creates a familiarity overlaid with an element that dislocates them into something 'out of the ordinary'. They are the same, yet different. Swati Chattopadhyay calls this 'the colonial uncanny' (Chattopadhyay 2005, p. 33).

This study has established that the façades of the Great Houses were influenced by the British buildings of the colonial era and that certain rooms were designated for the entertaining of Europeans. The study has also substantiated that traditional Hindu ways of life continued unabated within the Great Houses. These disparate factors corroborate the study's premise that the Great Families separated their lives between Indian and European ways, between tradition and modernity. The inclusion of plan forms and drawings in this study establish the ways in which the 'inner' or private areas of a Great Houses contrasted with the changing colonial world outside. The Great Houses 'outer' areas can be seen as the crossing point between colonial rule and indigenous traditions.

Though the plan forms of the Great Houses are similar, factors such as location restrictions, dates of construction, degrees of religiosity and the combined personal taste of the owners, engineers and builders show differences. A degree of eclecticism is also a factor with personal quirks, interests and hobbies often being embedded in the style of the Great Houses. Overall there is a certain amount of laissez faire in the designs, which were often more eccentric than tasteful, given contemporary images of 'good taste'. The conspicuous Neo-Classical façades of the Great Houses were clear symbols of the aspirations of the Great Families which included demonstrating they were loyal to the British colonial administration, familiar with European manners and customs and lived a European way of life, which equated to being modern, fashionable and progressive. Though the Great Families retained many old Bengali domestic customs and behaviour and still sought their identity from Bengal's aristocratic Mughal past, their cultivation of certain western ways of life was also part of their desire to be seen as wealthy upper class individuals. An important part of their

'westernisation' was loyalty to the British who had paved their way for their wealth and the ensuing assurance that such loyalty would ensure the continuation of material gains in the future.

Today, the decline of the Great Houses and the families that strive to retain them parallels the socio-economic and political history of Kolkata and the physical decline of north Kolkata. Evenson suggests that old mansions can be converted to commercial use or multiple occupancy while continuing to 'embellish with their faded dignity the clutter and tawdriness of deteriorating neighbourhoods' (Evenson, 1989, p. 264). This is one solution to the problem of what to do with Kolkata's Great Houses (as mentioned in Chapter Nine) and indeed, many are already utilised in this way, such as the conversion of old mansions into restaurants and designer shops, however, that has not halted the decline and decay of the monumental Great Houses and the families that hold the history of India's first close encounter with European culture

The changes experienced by the Great Families are not restricted to Third World countries. Politics, economics and new ideas of class structures have also changed the lifestyles and homes of aristocrats all over the world. Many of these aristocrats have been forced to convert their castles and estates to hotels and resorts in order to maintain them. Like the former maharajahs of northern India, who today wear their orders and family jewels to greet tourists, European aristocrats also dress for dinner and play the role expected of them by their paying guests.

It is impossible to conclude definitively what the future holds for the Great Houses. This study has shown the many and diverse problems inherent in these heritage buildings that receive little to no heritage funding from the government of West Bengal and that are owned by a people who, on the whole are impoverished. With no tourist industry as such, family differences, litigation, the threat of developers and the harsh climate it would seem to make continued decline inevitable. Be that as it may, there are examples of some houses, or parts of them, having been transformed into schools and universities and a few families have managed to evolve with the times and begin careers and businesses that have made it possible to keep enough servants to maintain their Great Houses.

This study has drawn attention to the heritage value of the Great Houses of Kolkata and their Indian founders as an alternative to focussing on the British colonial buildings of Kolkata and the ways of life of the British. This neglect is not restricted to scholarship. Indeed, the extensive photo-documentation of this study has glaringly confirmed the deterioration of the Great Houses today. In contrast, local and overseas funded conservation projects have focussed on the restoration of the British buildings of Kolkata. This study has, if nothing else, shown the severe state of neglect of these heritage buildings.

In the beginning of research for this study there was urgency to photo-document the extant Great Houses before further decline. Despite a new awareness of heritage and conservation issues in Kolkata, from 2004 to 2007 there have been noticeable changes and deterioration to these buildings and it would seem that their position in the future is precarious. Future research would be best embarked on as soon as possible as the houses are in daily jeopardy. Furthermore, as the older generation pass on, the future of the houses will become more uncertain. From this writer's point of view, and at the time of writing, it would seem that the Great Houses are destined to remain in a state of decline.

The dissertation by Monolina Bhattacharyya which looks at mid-eighteenth and nineteenth century north Kolkata mansions is along similar lines to this study. Bhattacharyya uses a sample of three Great Houses, namely the palace of Raja Nabakrishna, the palace of Khelat Ghosh and the palace of the Basu family. This study has gone a step further by developing a sample of nine residences in the city of Kolkata. The sample is broadly representative of the residences of wealthy merchants built in Kolkata between 1756 and 1901. A further five non-urban residences are described in this study, evidence of the sprawling layouts of *zamindari* estates which influenced the Great Houses of the mid-eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries.

Swati Chattopadhyay's book, 'Representing Calcutta *Representing Calcutta, Modernity, Nationalism, and the Colonial Uncanny*', is a spatial history of various broad aspects of the city with the inclusion of the plan forms of a number of Great Houses, which have been beneficial for this study. The study at hand though, has focussed entirely on the Great Houses.

This author's book, *The Forgotten Palaces of Calcutta* is entirely devoted to the subject of the Great Houses though it is a light hearted, greatly reduced volume and cannot be compared to this extended study. This thesis however, does build on this author's previous work and the scholarship of Bhattacharyya and Chattopadhyay, going further by including an extensive contemporary photo-documentation of the exteriors and interiors of the Great Houses and a range of personal interviews with descendents of the Great Families which are unique, and which give valuable insight into the position of the Great Families today.

Possibilities for further research

This study has included footprints of a number of Great Houses from the Kolkata Municipal Corporation. A search for other footprints of north Kolkata mansions at the K.M.C. could build a new sample as the basis for future research.

To date it would seem there are no accurately measured to-scale drawings of the Great Houses. Though costly, time consuming and difficult, accurately measuring the residences would be a valuable research project. It would be necessary to gain extensive permissions to access the homes and the surrounding area, which would include private residences.

Accessing family documents and photographs was also difficult and a problem all previous researchers have encountered. As the houses are two hundred to three hundred years old it is understandable that documents may have disintegrated or become lost over the generations. Many families have moved and become divided, resulting in the loss of family histories where others have not bothered keeping plans and documents. If access to family histories, photographs, documents or plans could be found or made available, these would certainly enhance a future study.

Drawing attention to the history and unique character of these residences and the historic area of north Kolkata through the area of heritage and conservation would be a valuable side of any further research that was embarked on as very little has been achieved in the way of heritage awareness and conservation programs to date. The conservation of heritage, it seems from this study, will take second place to political considerations and personal whims. That is a pity.

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Saha, Anup,. Kolkata historian, November, 2007.

Sarcar, Arkhil, heritage architect and historian, Kolkata, November, 2005.

Shaw, Gaur, Kolkata historian, November, 2005.

Rakshit, architect, Professor, Kolkata University, November, 2005.