

Chapter.12. Colonial Cities

Urbanisation, Planning and Architecture

In this chapter, we will discuss the process of urbanisation in colonial India, explore the distinguishing characteristics of colonial cities and track social changes within them.

The economic activities of the English in three Cities-Madras (Chennai), Calcutta (Kolkata) and Bombay (Mumbai).

All three were originally fishing and weaving villages. They became important centres of trade due to the economic activities of the English East India Company.

Bombay-English King's Dowry

Company agents settled in Madras in 1639 and in Calcutta in 1690. Bombay Was given to the Company in 1661 by the English king, who had got it as part of his wife's dowry from the king of Portugal.

The Company established trading and administrative offices in each of these settlements. By the middle of the nineteenth century these settlements had become big cities from where the new rulers controlled the country. Institutions were set up to regulate economic activity.

Indians experienced political domination in new ways in these cities.

Question:

How did Company get the three cities? [Answer above]

Explain towns and cities in Pre-colonial times

Towns were often defined in opposition to rural areas.

They came to represent specific forms of economic activities and cultures.

Towns were peopled with artisans, traders, administrators and rulers.

Towns and cities were often fortified by walls which symbolised their separation from the countryside

There was a reverse flow of humans and goods from towns to villages.

Mughals towns

During the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the towns built by the Mughals were famous for their concentration of populations, their monumental buildings and their Imperial grandeur and wealth.

Agra, Delhi and Lahore were important centres of imperial administration and control.

Mansabdars and jagirdars who usually maintained houses in these cities.

The presence of the emperor and noblemen in these centres meant that a wide variety of services had to be provided.

The treasury was also located in the imperial capital.

The emperor lived in a fortified palace and the town was enclosed by a wall, with entry and exit being regulated by different gates.

Within these towns were gardens, mosques, temples, tombs, colleges, bazaars and caravanserais.

The focus of the town was oriented towards the palace and the principal mosque.

What is the special feature of Madurai and Kanchipuram?

In the towns of South India such as Madurai and Kanchipuram the principal focus was the temple. These towns were also important for commerce, religious festivals, and fairs. The ruler was the principal patron of religious institutions.

Question:

What were the changes that happened with towns in the eighteenth century?

1. Decline of Mughal power and old towns

The eighteenth century old towns went into decline and new towns developed. The Mughal capitals, Delhi and Agra, lost their political authority.

2. The growth of regional capitals

This period saw the growth of regional capitals – Lucknow, Hyderabad, Seringapatam, Poona (present-day Pune), Nagpur, Baroda (present day Vadodara) and Tanjore (present-day Thanjavur).

3. Some local nobles and officials associated to Mughals rule also created new urban settlements.

4. Companies set up base (trading centres)

The European commercial Companies had set up base in different places early during the Mughal era: the Portuguese in Panaji in 1510, the Dutch in Masulipatnam in 1605, the British in Madras in 1639 and the French in Pondicherry (present-day Puducherry) in 1673.

5. Towns started growing around trading centres

6. Growth of sea based empires deciding the nature of society

By the end of the eighteenth century the land-based empires in Asia were replaced by the powerful sea-based European empires.

7. New buildings and institutions developed in colonial cities

Colonial port cities such as Madras, Calcutta and Bombay rapidly emerged as the new economic capitals.

New buildings and institutions developed, and urban spaces were ordered in new ways.

2. Finding Out about Colonial Cities

Colonial records and urban history

Why did British keep records?

The British kept detailed records on their commercial affairs.

They carried out regular surveys, gathered statistical data, and published various official reports.

1. Mapping Records

From the early years, the colonial government was keen on mapping. It felt that good maps were necessary to understand the landscape and know the topography.

This knowledge would allow better control over the region.

The town maps give information regarding the location of hills, rivers and vegetation and all important planning structures on defense structure.

They also show the location of *ghats*, density and quality of houses and alignment of roads and plan strategies of taxation.

2. Municipal corporations-records

From the late nineteenth century, the British tried to raise money for administering towns through the systematic annual collection of municipal taxes.

Institutions like the municipal corporation were set up to administer essential services such as water supply, sewerage, road building and public health.

The activities of municipal corporations in turn generated a whole new set of records that maintained in municipal record rooms.

Census Records

By the mid-nineteenth century several local censuses had been carried out in different regions. The first all-India census was attempted in 1872.

Thereafter censuses became a regular feature.

This collection of data is an invaluable source for studying urbanisation in India.

Historians have, however, found that the figures can be misleading.

[Before we use these figures we need to understand who collected the data, and why and how they were gathered. We also need to know what was measured and what was not.]

What were the problems faced while collecting the census?

[Ans. study material-P.75]

BOX

What maps reveal and conceal

The development of survey methods, accurate scientific instruments and British imperial needs meant that maps were prepared with great care.

The Survey of India was established in 1878.

While the maps that were prepared give us a lot of information, they also reflect the bias of the British rulers.

Large settlements of the poor in towns went unmarked on maps because they seemed unimportant to the rulers.

As a result it was assumed that these blank spaces on the map were available for other development schemes.

When these schemes were undertaken, the poor were evicted.

Trends of change

Describe the trends of change in the history of towns after 1800.

[Ans.: Study material P.75]

1. To what extent are census data useful in reconstructing patterns of urbanization in the colonial context?

3. What Were the New Towns Like?

Ports, forts and centres for services

How ports, forts and centres of services became big cities

[Ans.: Study material P.75 -76]

Question:

2. What do the terms “White” and “Black” Town signifies?

3.2 A new urban milieu (the surroundings)

[Ans.: Study material P.76]

Examine the changes in the nature of the colonial city after the Revolt of 1857

The nature of the colonial city changed further in the mid-nineteenth century.

After the Revolt of 1857 British attitudes in India were shaped by a constant fear of rebellion.

Civil Lines They felt white people had to live in more secure and segregated enclaves (area ethnically different), away from the threat of the “natives”.

The pasturelands and agricultural fields around the older towns were cleared, and new urban spaces called “Civil Lines” were set up. The white people began to live in the Civil Lines.

Cantonments places the cantonments where Indian troops under European were stationed and developed as safe enclaves.

These areas were separate in towns with broad streets, bungalows, gardens, barracks, parade ground and churches etc

Black areas

For the British, the “Black” areas came to symbolize not only chaos and anarchy, but also filth and disease.

Cleanliness and hygiene of the “White” areas. Measures were taken for cleanliness and hygiene of the “White” areas.

Sanitary vigilance: From the 1860s and 1870s, stringent administrative measures regarding sanitation were implemented and building activity in the Indian towns was regulated. Underground piped water supply and sewerage and drainage systems were also put in place around this time.

Sanitary vigilance thus became another way of regulating Indian towns.

3.3 The first hill stations

Why did British choose hill stations?

[Ans.: Study material P.76]

Hill stations important for economy

Hill stations were important for the colonial economy. With the setting up of tea and coffee plantations in the adjoining areas, an influx of immigrant labour from the plains began.

3.4 Social life in the new cities

Describe the changes of social life in the new cities

For the Indian population, the new cities were in constant change.

There was a dramatic contrast between extreme wealth and poverty.

New transport facilities meant that people could live at a distance from the city centre.

There was a gradual separation of the place of work from the place of residence.

Travelling from home to office or the factory was a completely new kind of experience.

Public parks, theatres and cinema halls provided new forms of entertainment and social interaction.

Within the cities new social groups ‘middle classes’ were formed.

They had access to new educational institutions such as schools, colleges and libraries.

They could put forward their opinions on society and government in newspapers, journals and public meetings.

Condition of women in cities

Cities offered new opportunities for women.

Middle-class women expressed themselves through the medium of journals, autobiographies and books.

Over time, they became more visible in public as new professions in the city as domestic and factory workers, teachers, and theatre and film actresses.

Working class- Another new class in the cities

Another new class within the cities was the labouring poor or the working class. Paupers from rural areas moved to the cities in the hope of employment.

Some saw cities as places of opportunity; others were attracted by different way of life To minimize costs of living in the city, most male migrants left their families behind in their village homes.

4. Segregation, Town Planning and Architecture

Madras, Calcutta and Bombay

Madras, Calcutta and Bombay gradually developed into the biggest cities of colonial India. We have been examining some of the distinctive features of these cities in the preceding sections. Now we will look in detail at one characteristic for each city.

4.1 Settlement and segregation in Madras

Explain the growth of city of Madras.

[Ans: Study material P.76-77 up to 4.3 Black town]

4.2 Town planning in Calcutta

How town planning started in Calcutta?

Modern town planning began in the colonial cities.

There were many reasons why the British took upon the task of town planning in Bengal.

Defence

One immediate reason was defence. In 1756, Sirajudaula, the Nawab of Bengal, attacked Calcutta and sacked the small fort which the British traders had built as their depot for goods.

In 1757, when Sirajudaula was defeated in the Battle of Plassey, the East India Company decided to build a new fort, one that could not be easily attacked.

Calcutta grown from three villages

Calcutta had grown from three villages called Sutanati, Kolkata and Govindapur.

The Company cleared a site in the southernmost village of Govindapur and the traders and weavers living there were asked to move out.

Around the new Fort William, they left a vast open space which came to be locally known as the Maidan

Building residences along the Maidan

This was done so that there would be no obstructions to a straight line of fire from the Fort against an advancing enemy army.

That was how the English settlement in Calcutta gradually started taking shape.

Wellesley's Architecture

Lord Wellesley the Governor General built a massive palace, Government House, for himself in Calcutta, a building that was expected to convey the authority of the British.

After Wellesley's departure, the work of town planning was carried on by the Lottery Committee (1817) with the help of the government.

The Lottery Committee was so named because funds for town improvement were raised through public lotteries.

The new divide of "healthy" and "unhealthy"

The existing racial divide of the "White Town" and "Black Town" was reinforced by the new divide of "healthy" and "unhealthy".

Question:

4. Examine how concerns of defence and health gave shape to Calcutta

How did the threat of epidemics give a further impetus to town planning?

4.3 Architecture in Bombay

How Bombay emerged as a commercial capital of India in the 19th century?

Bombay was initially seven islands. As the population grew, the islands were joined to create more space and they gradually fused into one big city.

Bombay was the commercial capital of colonial India.

It was the center of international trade.

By the end of the nineteenth century, half the imports and exports of India passed through Bombay.

Opium trade

One important item of this trade was opium that the East India Company exported to China. In this, the Company was profitable and led to the growth of an Indian capitalist class.

Bombay's capitalists came from diverse communities such as Parsi, Marwari, Konkani Muslim, Gujarati Bania, Bohra, Jew and Armenian.

It was also a center of Indian cotton growth.

In 1869 the **Suez Canal** was opened and this further strengthened Bombay's links with the world economy.

By the late nineteenth century Indian merchants in Bombay were investing their wealth in cotton mills and patronized building activity in the city.

The architectural style in Bombay was usually European.

What are the different colonial architectural styles which can be seen in Bombay city?

[Ans.: Study material P.81]

What do buildings and architectural styles tell us?

Reflection of the aesthetic ideals

Expression of the vision

Expression of power

Shaping the contours of culture

Many Indians retained indigenous styles

Regional and national tastes

