

Calcutta and Calcuttans

From Dihi to Megalopolis

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CALCUTTA * * *

IV. The discovery of peat and coal

Peat is a brownish or blackish material produced by the decay of vegetation. It represents the first stage in the transformation of vegetable matter into coal. These woody fragments are plastic—they dry easily and fall to pieces. The peat bed in Calcutta borings at a depth of 1835 ft. seems older than the Hooghly—it appears to have been deposited in an extensive lake or marsh, since silted up and traversed by the river. The overlying clay of the peat bed is marked by fresh-water gastropod shells. No marine or brackish water fauna has been found—it is a fresh water deposit. It is believed that a large amount of partially decayed matter was brought by the river. Mild tectonism supported further sedimentation. There was an assemblage of fossil pollen grains and pores found preserved and this depicts the Late—Quaternary vegetational history.¹⁸ Moreover, in 1970 there have been Metro borings, but the results thereof are not interesting from the geological point of view.¹⁹

The presence of coal below Calcutta is doubted. The coal pebbles found at a depth of 392 ft. at the Fort William borings during 1835-40 were supposed to have come from the Harigaon field in the north-west corner of the Garo Hills, Meghalaya. They were not a lower or an upper Gondwana type of coal and matched with the upper cretaceous and Tertiary coals of Assam. Maybe, these were brought by the old Indobrahm river.²⁰

V. The fossil remains unearthed

A fossil bone brought up from a depth of 350 ft. during the Fort William borings in 1857 was identified by James Prinsep with that of a dog. Some bones were discovered in the state of blue clay alluvium of the circular canal when dug up to a depth of 20 ft. Some more bones were discovered in 1813 by Lt. J.

18. Ghosh, A.K. 'A study of Calcutta peat and associated sediments' in *Indian Journal of power & River Valley Development*, Vol. 14 (Feb 1964), 14-25.

19. Ghosh, P.K./Gupta, S.—'Subsoil character of Calcutta Region' in *Proceedings of Third Symposium on application of soil mechanics & foundation engineering in Eastern India* (1972) Calcutta.

20. Culson, op. cit 25-6 ; Fox, C.S.—"Coal in India" in *Memo. Geo. Surv. India.*, Vol. 57, (1931), 49-50, 237-40.

Colvin during the excavation of a tank at Dum Dum. These could not be identified properly ; but it was found that they lay pretty close together, their interstices being filled with earth.²¹ The fossils found at a depth of 950 ft. and beyond at the Akra digging were found by M. R. Sahni to be "estuarine". The genera had been identified to be *Ostrea* and *Meretrix*. The position of Calcutta is such that with a depression of only 30 ft. or so most of the Gangetic delta would be inundated and estuarine shells deposited thereupon. There have been frequent advances and retreats of such estuarine conditions in the formation of the Gangetic delta. The presence of peat and *Kunkar* beds indicates this succession of alternative depression and elevation. And the general movement has been progressive and shows depression concomitantly with the deposition of alluvial matter during the floods by the tributary mouths of the Ganges. It is interesting to note that while depression was going on in the Gangetic delta, there was uplift in Peninsular India to the West and South-West of Calcutta.²²

The estuarine conditions may be illustrated by the discovery of an old oyster bed 5 or 6 ft. below the foundation of the Clive Buildings, *i.e.* Gillander House at 8, Netaji Subhas Road in July, 1901-2 and by similar finds in the Diamond Harbour Road in 1980. The *ostrea gryphoides* found at Akra Road, Netaji Subhas Road and Diamond Harbour Road belong to the Miocene period. Semi-fossilised bones of an antelope or a horse of the sub-recent age at Jadavpur were discovered in 1980.²³ Traces of an "animal world", more than 2000 years old were found in a village of Mochpol near Barasat while an old pond was being desilted.²⁴ The skeletal remains of one-horned rhinos have been recovered from Meenaklanare, Gobra, Calcutta. They point to the alluvial swamps of Calcutta, a thousand years ago.²⁵ Eleven bones were also found below the Clive Buildings.