

THE SOCIAL CONDITION
OF THE BRITISH COMMUNITY
IN BENGAL

1757-1800

BY

SURESH CHANDRA GHOSH

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E. J. BRILL

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"The first English lord of Beerbboom was Keating Sahib. . . . My mother held me up in her arms to look at him when he passed with his Sepoys and elephants."

And of the life of Cheap, the commercial resident, he says:

"He had a great house on the top of a hill, with a wall all round, higher than the ramparts round the fort in Calcutta. Within the wall were gardens and orchards bearing many fruits; also many houses and stores He had about sixty house-servants in all, with many horses, and an aviary full of strange birds. Deer used to run about in the pleasure-grounds."¹⁵³

This might be a description of an English gentleman in his country seat, but it could equally be the description of a Zamindar or high Mughal official in his palace-fort. It is probable that where the Europeans were few and isolated Indian influences predominated.

The movement of Europeans up country, and the growth of more regular contact with Indian Court life added new aristocratic overtones to their way of life. This could be observed in the life of a man like Colonel Collins, Resident at Jaipur, whose noble suite of tents, which "might have served for the Great Mogul", housed his servants and zenana, and who maintained a private artillery brigade, in the late eighteenth century,¹⁵⁴ or in the life of Ochterlony¹⁵⁵ or Metcalfe at Delhi in the early nineteenth century.¹⁵⁶ It can be seen also in the attempt to take over Indian styles of public display, as for example the provision of animal fights for the entertainment of distinguished visitors. This had become a regular custom among the nawabs and princes,¹⁵⁷ and when Clive on the assumption of the Diwani in 1765 wished to entertain Shuja-ud-daulah, animal fights were arranged as a part of the celebrations at vast cost to the Company.¹⁵⁸ In December of that same year Clive adopted the same Mughal style when the French and Dutch governors of Chandernagore and Chinsurah paid a good will visit to Calcutta, to congratulate Clive on the acquisition of the Diwani. Colonel Champion, who witnessed Clive's attempt to entertain in true Nawabi style, noted in his journal that the whole town assembled to witness the animal fights. Champion, however, records the fights as disappointing: a buffalo furiously attacked a tiger and lifted and threw him easily, but "as there was no opposition it

¹⁵³ Hunter, *op.cit.*, pp. 422-3.

¹⁵⁴ Thompson, *op.cit.*, p. 32.

¹⁵⁵ Heber, *op.cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 626-7.

¹⁵⁶ Thompson, *op.cit.*, pp. 149-50.

¹⁵⁷ Williamson, *op.cit.*, Plate 24, p. 92.

¹⁵⁸ Blechynden, *op.cit.*, p. 116.

afforded but little sport or pleasure", camels were brought in to fight, which bit each other's legs, but afforded "no diversion", finally there was as crowning spectacle a fight between an elephant, which ran amok and a rhinoceros, but, Champion notes, "as the Rhinoceros could not be moved there was no battle." From the Colonel's journal it would seem that much the liveliest part of the entertainment was when the elephant, which had been trained for battle, ran wild. It endeavoured to force the square, killing seven of the people lining it, then ran through a garden wall, and finally lifted the roof off a house before he was brought to his senses by the mahout.¹⁵⁹

Animal fights were not thought particularly good fun—except in the more plebian form of cock-fighting¹⁶⁰ and bear baiting, particularly indulged in by the cadets at Baraset¹⁶¹—and on the grand scale they were very expensive. The fights put on for the Nawab of Oudh by Clive in 1765 cost Rs. 2,812/- for the feeding and housing of the animals and the pay of their trainers.¹⁶² Such lavish and exotic expenditure was frowned on by the Court of Directors¹⁶³ and after 1766 there is no further mention of animal fights at Calcutta, though Wellesley was entertained by the Nawab of Oudh with such spectacles.¹⁶⁴

In the closing years of the eighteenth century the social life of the Europeans, and more especially in Calcutta, can be seen perceptibly to change. The enlargement of their numbers, the development of a more settled and assured life, the change in the political position of the Company relative to other Indian powers encouraged change from within, while the steady flow of newcomers from England brought with it the altered manners of that country. In most fields the tendency of all these changes was in the direction of a greater Anglicisation, a movement towards greater soberness and refinement and at the same time a withdrawal from Indian modes of life.

At the beginning of our period Bengal was still a frontier territory, where adventurers looked for quick fortunes, from war, political

¹⁵⁹ Journal of Col. Champion, 17 December 1765. *H.M.*, vol. 198, pp. 293-4.

¹⁶⁰ Cock fighting was not only enjoyed by military cadets, of course, witness Zoffany's famous picture of "Colonel Mordaunt's Cock Match" in Zoffany's "Cock Match at Lucknow" edited by H. E. A. Cotton, Plate facing page 127.

¹⁶¹ Carey, *op.cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 241-2.

¹⁶² Blechynden, *op.cit.*

¹⁶³ Until the end of our period the Court of Directors were advising their servants in Bengal to be frugal in amusements. See Despatches to Bengal, 25 May 1798, Paras. 75-6. *D.B.*, vol. 32, p. 407 *et seq.*

¹⁶⁴ D'Oyly, *op.cit.*, Plate 20.