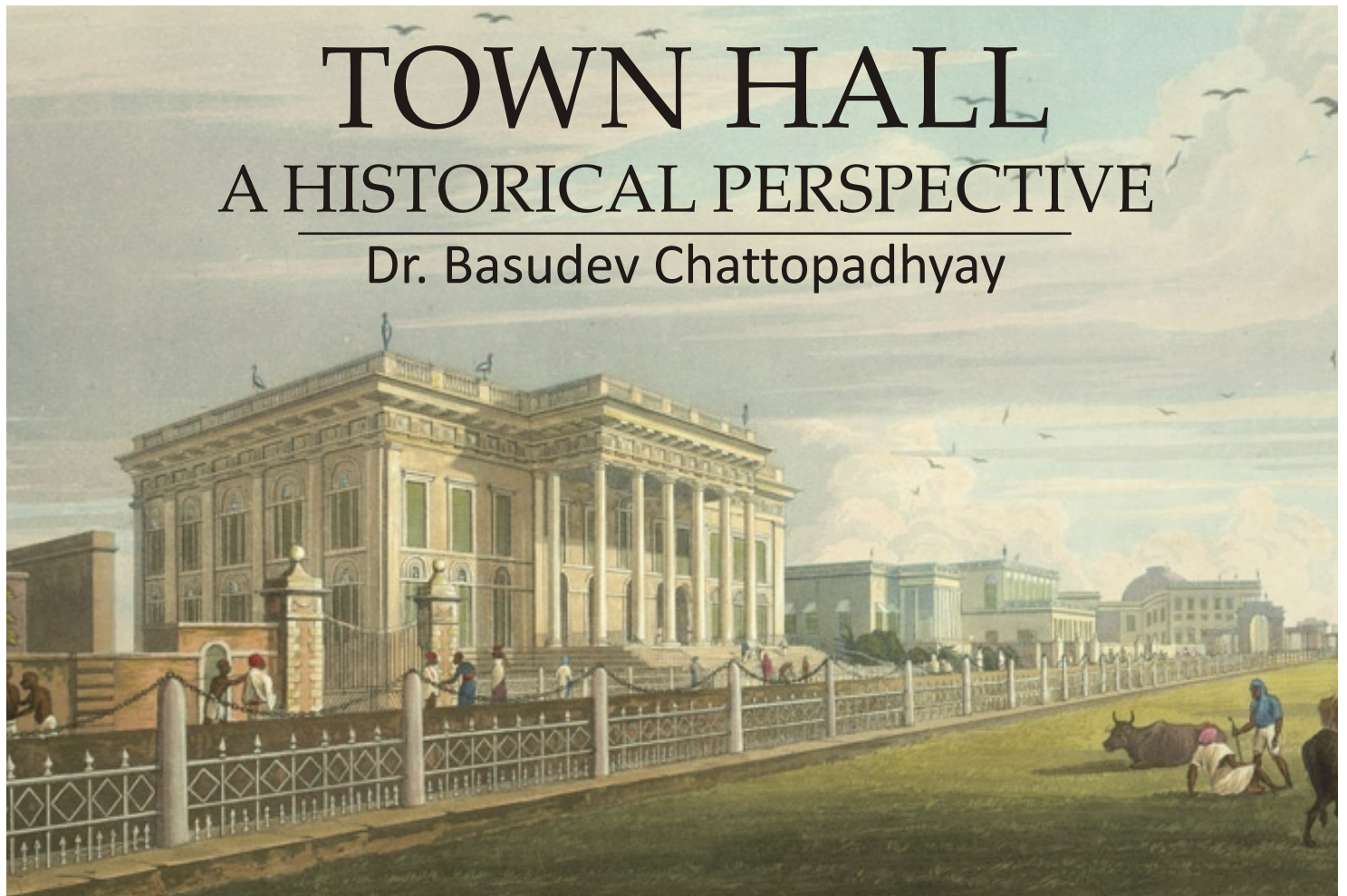




The Society for the Preservation of Archival Materials and Monuments of Calcutta has perhaps a 'pathological weakness' (borrowing what Khushwant Singh once remarked about Calcuttans for their city) for the Town Hall of Calcutta (now Kolkata) as it was this Society which played a key role in preventing its demolition four decades ago. The Hall was restored in the late Nineties and a hi-tech presentation of the city's history *Kolkata Panorama* was put up inside for the benefit of visitors. Recently the Hall underwent another restoration when experts from IIT, Roorkee were roped in for the task and measures are now afoot for converting the Town Hall as an exclusive Museum and Resource Centre of the city, which our Founder, Professor Nisith Ranjan Ray, had repeatedly pressed for. In this issue of our E-Bulletin, we reproduce the text of a talk* on the Town Hall delivered by Professor Basudev Chattopadhyay, Director of School of Studies, Netaji Subhas Open University, Calcutta as a Heritage Series Lecture of our Society on 1 September 1999. The talk was delivered a little after Professor Chattopadhyay wrote the book *The Town Hall of Calcutta* to commemorate the restoration of the Town Hall then.

We intend to carry in our E Bulletin henceforth articles published in our News Bulletins earlier for the benefit of our members and all those who are interested in the city's past.



TOWN HALL

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Basudev Chattopadhyay

The Town Hall of Calcutta forms an integral part in the socio-political history of modern Bengal. Its origin may be traced back to a somewhat fortuitous meeting held in Le Gallais Tavern way back in 1793. At this meeting the convenors decided to raise subscriptions for "the erection of a public building for general accommodation of the settlement". Subsequently, in yet another meeting

held on February 21, 1804, citizens decided to construct a town hall for the convenience of the European population of the East India Company's settlement. The ostensible purpose was to create a public space where they could hold meetings and formal receptions and display marvels of the English worthies.

*This was originally carried in the Society's News Bulletin, Vol X published in 1999.

The reason why the European community in Calcutta wanted to build a town hall is not difficult to understand. They had a good number of taverns and amusement halls in the White Town. Wright's New Tavern, Moore's Assembly Rooms, Exchange and Public Rooms and the Harmonic Tavern were of course there. But these were primarily places of European revelry ; they could hardly be used for purposes of formal receptions or public meetings. The Old Court House served these purposes for the time being in late eighteenth century. But it was an old building which had to be pulled down by order of the government in 1792. Thereafter the need for a town hail came to be more acutely felt.

The officials of the East India Company did not disagree with these sentiments but they were understandably unwilling to incur any extra expenditure in this regard. In those days lottery was a perfectly legitimate method of financing public buildings in England. It was therefore decided to raise funds through public lottery. Necessary funds having been raised, preparation for the construction of the hail began. Plans for the proposed hall was sanctioned in 1807 and Colonel J.Garstin was put in charge of construction. It was completed in 1813 and was handed over to a management committee, known as the Town Hall Committee. Thereafter the management of the hail underwent periodic changes. Finally, in 1867, the Hall passed into the hands of the Municipality (later on Corporation) of Calcutta.

The European community had every reason to feel proud of the Town Hall. Although not as impressive as the Government House which stood majestically in its vicinity, the Town Hall was still a showpiece building which no visitor could fail to notice. An anonymous author of *The Sketches of India* who visited Calcutta in 1814 was suitably impressed by the sight of the Hall: "The Town Hall of Calcutta is a handsome building of the Doric order and reflects its credit on the city." The same sentiment was reciprocated by the Indian community as well. Bhuban Mohan Mitra wrote in 1835 that the Hall "is the largest..in Calcutta...where public meetings of all descriptions take place, all parties in Calcutta having access to it."

The Town Hall was spacious enough to accommodate the social needs of the European community of the settlement. It was a two-storied structure above a brick-vaulted foundation. The ground



floor was about 23ft. high and contained a marble hail and a few smaller rooms for various purposes. The upper Floor, which had a teak planked floor, was about 30 ft. in height. It was divided by double rows of pillars into a central hall and two aisles. At the northern end there was a music gallery and at the eastern side, a raised platform. Again, there were few smaller rooms which were used for card and supper rooms. The building as a whole was a solid rectangular block with two protruding porticos on the north. The carriage entrance was on the north under a lofty covered portico.

Initially the Hall offered the Europeans of Calcutta a permanent place where they could meet and discuss matters of common concern, arrange formal balls and dinners and receive visiting dignitaries. In one of the earliest reference to the Town Hall, Lady Nugent showered praise on a gathering. On 27 December, 1814 she entered the carriage and drove to the Town Hall. She writes in her journal

All Calcutta were out to see the procession.....
While the breakfast was going on, at the Town Hall, I had constantly servants going backwards and forwards, with various nice things for me ; and several of our poor Hindoos took advantage of this, to come and make their last salaams.

As years rolled on, social gatherings of Europeans had become a regular feature of the Town Hall. William Huggins, an indigo planter, left an account of the Hall in 1824 :

Public balls are given in the Town Hall and, like the course, attract the most respectable inhabitants. Stewards are appointed beforehand to make what arrangements may be necessary. Quadrilles and country-dances are generally practised; however, waltzing has been lately introduced. Here the prettiest faces and finest waists in India are to be seen.

Huggins says that public dances in those days were attended by the high and mighty. Men of humble status seldom made their appearance in the Town Hall balls.



In short, within a decade the Town Hall was able to establish its claim of being the most coveted public space for the Europeans in Calcutta. In an English verse on old Calcutta (from "Shigrampo") the Town Hall, as it existed in 1821, comes out quite clearly. A few lines from the poem is worth quoting

Next, the Town Hall in turn, stands in splendid array,
Tho' many supposed; twould fall down t'other day,
But confident grown, they by hundreds assemble,
And dance till they make ev'ry board of it tremble !

The poet was justifiably proud of the Hall :

Tis a building that long will pre-eminence claim,
And stand to commem'rate its architect's fame !
Tis there, when they hold their famed conversationes,
Ladies meet their admirers, and men meet their cronies.

The poet was no less observant of the attitude of the Europeans at the time of the dinners. With an eye for the details, he writes,

How pleasing to view them, all lay in a stock
of Mourghy and tongue, ere it strikes 12 o'clock,
when that fatal hour once, on the bell is but beat,
you may still go on eating , but pay when you eat ;
And most men will doubtless, I mean no offence,
Eat with far greater zest, when its free of expense !

But the Town Hall, even in its early years was not all about dance and dinner. Apart from balls and suppers, contentious issues were often discussed in public meetings. Even the Eurasians voiced their grievances in more than one meeting held there. At one such, held on 28 March, 1831, Derozio, arguably the most dynamic member of the community, made a savage attack on the Europeans for having ignored the plight of the Eurasians. The Indians, too, began to make selective use of the Hall from the early decades of the nineteenth century. Apart from meetings held exclusively by the Europeans or Eurasians, joint meetings by Europeans and Indians were quite common at least in the early years of the Town Hall. This was because, the Bengali *bhadralok* had an abiding faith in inter racial collaboration as evidenced, for instance, in some collaborative commercial ventures of inter- racial nature. But in course of time Indians were made to realize the limits of inter- racial collaboration in the colonial setting. Accordingly, joint meetings gradually became infrequent till they ceased altogether.

As a matter of fact, in the second half of the nineteenth century the use of the Town Hall as a public space came to be contested by John Bull and the baboos. With the sharpening of conflict between politically conscious Indians and racially arrogant Europeans, the Town Hall meetings became increasingly more

acrimonious. What was more insulting to the Indians was the risk of permission to hold meetings in the Hall being refused by the authority. Under these circumstances, Indians began to feel the need of an alternative public space under their own control. But in the meanwhile, the Hall witnessed a galaxy of Indians attending meetings held within its portals. In the nineteenth century distinguished Indians like Raja Rammohan Roy, Raja Radhakanta Deb, Mrityrunjay Vidyalkar, Dwarakanath Tagore, Prasanna Kumar Tagore, Ramanath Tagore, Motilal Seal, Sk. Lall Mohammed, Rajendralal Mitra, Aga Mirza Sherajee and others frequently held meetings in the Hall. The Sadharan Brahma Samaj was formally launched at a Town Hall meeting on 15 May 1878. The Indian National Congress and the Indian Association used the hall as an important venue. In the 1890s Jagadish Chandra Bose demonstrated his early experiments in electric waves in the Town Hall. Rabindranath Tagore delivered his famous speech "Kantha Rodh" in the Town Hall in 1898.

The first decade of the twentieth century was an extremely eventful period in the history of the Town Hall. Enlightened leaders of public opinion such as Devaprasad Sarvadhikary and Maulavi Abdul Karim vigorously protested against the high-handed policies of Lord Curzon, especially in the field of higher education. The Swadeshi Movement was formally launched from a Town Hall meeting held on 7 August 1905. This was indeed a mammoth public meeting, graphically described by Surendra Nath Banerjee in his autobiography. In later years Rabindranath Tagore, Subodh Chandra Mullick, Abdullah Rasul, Abdul Harid Ghaznavi, Ramendra Sundar Trivedi and others had periodically visited the Hall and addressed public meetings.

But the Indians had already begun looking for alternative sites. On 22 September 1905 a meeting was held in the Town Hall to discuss the details and on 16 October the foundation stone of the proposed national hall was laid. It was named the Federation Hall. Ananda Mohan Bose was taken to the site of the hall in an invalid chair. Henceforth the new sites which were free from official control were being patronised by the nationalists. In the meanwhile there was a perceptible change in the tone and temper of Indian nationalism after the end of the First World War. Calcutta could not remain immune from such changes.



The political ambience of the city changed so abruptly that the Town Hall could no longer remain the hub of the city's political activities. In the altered climate politics virtually flowed into the streets of Calcutta. Places like Shradhdhananda Park, Deshbandhu Park, Wellington Square, Ochterlony Monument and Hazra Park emerged as new sites of political activities. As a result, the Town Hall slowly lost its aura and eventually became what it had initially been : a place for ceremonial gatherings. In the inter-War period Bengal luminaries occasionally met together in the Town Hall. Tagore visited the place on different occasions. Sir C.V.Raman, Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, Sir Nilratan Sarkar, Ramananda Chatterjee and others graced the Hall and the meetings held therein during this period. But the locus of political activities having gone to the streets and parks, the Town Hall meetings were more in the nature of felicitations to dignitaries. Perhaps the last important meeting which was held in the Hall was on 1 August, 1942. The ban on the Communist Party of India having been withdrawn this meeting was attended by the workers and trade unionists. It was presided over by Rahul Sankrityayan. This may be said to have marked the grand finale of the usual activities of the Hall.

During the Second World War, the Town Hall was used for war-related purposes. The government even opened a rationing office inside the Hall. After independence, the Town Hall seems to have been consigned to collective oblivion. It was converted into Municipal Magistrate's office. Other branches of the Corporation of Calcutta were accommodated within its premises. Parts of the building were also occupied by the Municipal Service Commission and the West Bengal Public Service Commission.

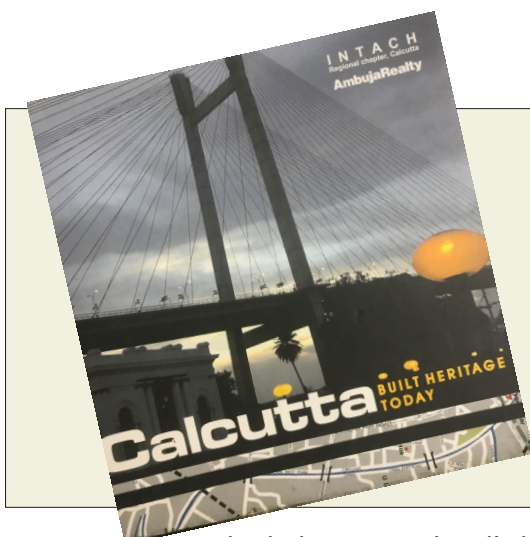
As a result of such needless interference and random occupations, some of the inherent structural defects became more and more acute. In fact, it was discovered way back in 1815 that this building was structurally flawed. At that time the company had to consult a team of engineers to identify the defects and suggest remedies. A more serious problem arose in 1818 when several pillars in the upper floor were found to be defective. In short, from its inception the Town Hall was structurally weak and patchwork repairs from time to time only added to its agony. When the Hall was turned into an adjunct of the Corporation, indiscriminate interference with its structure continued unabated. It was almost on its way to destruction. Thanks to the laudable initiative of *A Homage Trust*, the hall regained some of its old lustre. One only hopes that the Corporation would have the wisdom to preserve this historic building and put it to proper use.



Dr. Basudev Chattopadhyay being felicitated by the Society's President, Dr. Nema Sadhan Bose

This issue of the E-Bulletin also carries the link to a blog on the well-known Hastings House at Alipur, Kolkata posted by Dr. Nilina Deb Lal, eminent Conservation Architect and Independent Researcher, who compiled the wonderful guide book **Calcutta: Built Heritage Today** published in 2006 by INTACH Calcutta Regional Chapter.

Dr. Deb Lal also delivered a Heritage Series Lecture of the Society on The River and the City : Built Form on the Waterfront on 11 October 2006.



The link to Dr. Deb Lal's blog is <https://nilinadeblal.wordpress.com/2021/01/10/hastings-house/>