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Claiming the Riverfront: Building the Prinsep Ghat in Colonial Calcutta

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ABSTRACT

Between the late-eighteenth and late-nineteenth centuries a large number of ghats or stepped landings were built in colonial cities on the Ganges to facilitate trade, leisure, as well as collection of drinking water, bathing, and religious rituals. Given the importance of the Ganges as a riverine artery for commerce and transportation, the ghats were also seen as sites of commemoration—of embedding ones name in the landscape. This article discusses one such commemorative ghat, Prinsep Ghat, in colonial Calcutta. By placing the Prinsep Ghat in the context of building ghats in the lower reaches of the Gangetic plains in Bengal, the essay argues that we must attend to the politics of claiming the banks of the river if we are to understand the role played by competing constituencies in shaping the riverfront.



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Ghats in Colonial Towns

When we think of river ghats (stepped landings on riverbanks), those in colonial cities in India do not easily come to mind. Although the ghats in colonial cities were mostly built between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, making them coeval with their more famous brethren in precolonial cities such as Varanasi, we know very little about the history of the former. It might surprise some readers to know that a large number of ghats were built in the British colonial city of Calcutta¹ and the French colonial city of Chandannagar (located 35 km north of Calcutta) during European colonial rule.²

Built by both Indians and Europeans, the number of ghats in Chandannagar, Calcutta, Panihati and other smaller towns in the lower reaches of the Ganges changed over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The reasons for this fluctuation were manifold.

In terms of extant ghats, a quick comparison with Varanasi is instructive. While Varanasi has 84 ghats along a stretch of 10 km, Kolkata has 71 ghats along a stretch of approximately 13 km. If we consider the larger Kolkata administrative region (KMDA) there are a total of 498 ghats. Chandannagar still has 34 existing ghats. The small suburban town of Panihati on the northern fringe of Kolkata has as many as 13 ghats in just over a mile, a density comparable to Varanasi. On the opposite bank in Kolkata, long considered equivalent to Varanasi in religious merit (*Ganga'r pashim kul Baranasi samatul*)³, there are indeed fewer ghats, despite the impressive number of 22 ghats under the Howrah Municipal Authority (Bhattacharya, 2006, p.75). The 62 ghats over

a stretch of 40 km between Ballykhal and Uluberia constitute low density in these lower reaches of the Ganges.⁴

The numbers of ghats, as impressive as these might be, however do not give us sufficient insight into the history of ghats. Rather the story lies in the pattern of growth, the location of ghats within the riverfront of a settlement, and how ghats came to acquire significance. The conferral of significance is related to politics, the social milieu, as well as aesthetic conventions of the day.

Were the ghats in colonial cities any different from those found in Varanasi? Topographic and hydrological specificities mattered in building of ghats. Unlike Varanasi with its steep bank that curves in an arc creating a picturesque “amphitheater” effect (Havell, 1905), ghats in colonial cities established in the flat terrain of the lower reaches of the Ganges were morphologically different. Their “picturesque” quality was of a different order as well, enmeshed as these sites were with the reminders of ocean-going trade and a new set of property relations that had emerged in colonial cities.⁵

Built by both Indians and Europeans, the number of ghats in Chandannagar, Calcutta, Panihati and other smaller towns in the lower reaches of the Ganges changed over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The reasons for this fluctuation were manifold. The river altered its course, often unpredictably, necessitating the abandonment of older ghats and construction of new ones. The commercial importance of these towns shifted likewise with the whims of the river.

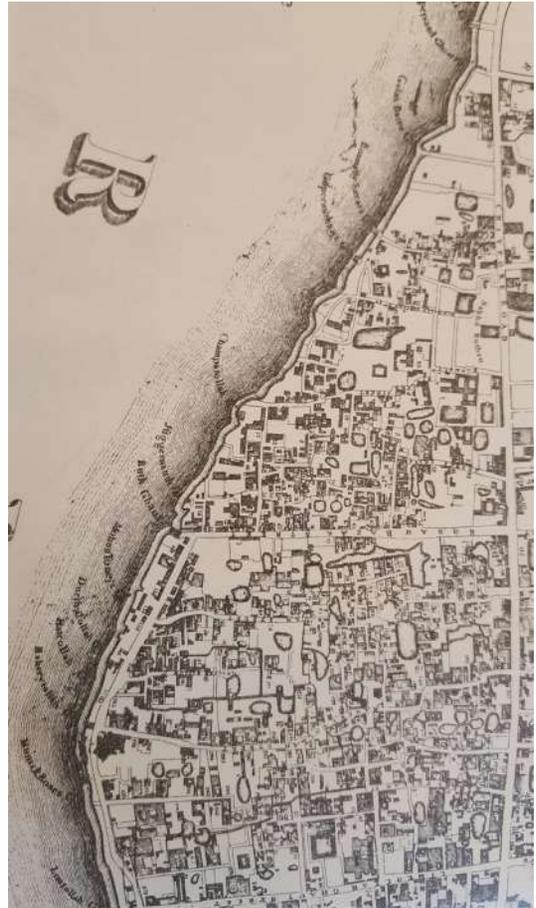


Figure 1a and 1b: Comparison between section of Aaron Upjohn's 1792-3 Map and the Lottery Committee Plan by I. P. Schlach and T. Prinsep, 1825-32.

Without sufficient depth of the river channel, ships and boats with deep draughts could not arrive at the ports. Political ascendancy of the colonial powers left an impression on the prosperity of these towns, and the increase in the number of ghats roughly corresponded with the settlement's commercial prosperity and the wealth of the land-owning class. Last but not least, population growth, rising and ebbing with political, commercial and riverine fortunes created demand for access to the water.

Ghats- Different Types

Ghats are found in different shapes and forms. There were a large number of kutchha ghats made by the horizontal piling of tree trunks; ghats made from tal and sal trunks were common. There were ghats made of a few brick or stone steps, without deep foundation, that were prone to being swept away by the force of the water. The most impressive and long lasting were those that were built on deep foundations, had broad steps, ideally on a gentle incline, with a superstructure that created shelter from the

sun and the rain and provided other amenities. Ghats that had sufficient width to allow passage for a large number of people were particularly suitable for festive occasions.

Functional separation in terms of bathing ghats, ferry ghats, and cremation ghats was common. For example in nineteenth century Calcutta, the two cremation ghats were located in the northern part of the city, while the entire length of the riverbank was studded with ghats for loading and unloading of goods and for embarkation and disembarkation of passengers from boats and ships. The ships typically conducted their loading and unloading in the southern and central stretch of the Calcutta's riverfront, adjacent to the administrative center of the city, and docks, different from ghats, were built to facilitate loading and unloading. Then, some ghats were specifically linked to temples—ghat and temple building as acts of religious merit went hand in hand.

Not every ghat allowed public access. Many ghats along the Ganges and Hooghly in Bengal were part of garden houses, factories, and government property that had restricted access. Indeed most of the ghats leading from garden houses were not recorded in colonial maps precisely because they were within private premises. Unless a ghat had public or commercial importance, that is, unless a ghat served a larger community it did not register in the official listing of ghats.

Motivations for Ghat Building

If we go by the record of city maps, the number of ghats in Calcutta rose from 34 in 1784 to 60 in 1856.⁶ By the late nineteenth century there were over 80 ghats in the city, more than that

of Varanasi. This was a result of the growth of the city's population (which increased about 4 times between 1782 and 1872) and size: by the

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mid-nineteenth century, the city had expanded considerably to incorporate the suburbs on the north and south, thereby doubling the length of the city's frontage to the river. Even if we grant the vagaries of mapmaking, it is obvious that the number of ghats increased between the late eighteenth and early twentieth century, and that the names of some of these ghats changed over time. For example, the 1825-32 Lottery Committee Map of Calcutta includes three new ghats between Bonomalee Sarkar Ghat and Ketooa Ghat (renamed Ruth Ghat)—Gopee Mohun Deb Ghat, Champatollah Ghat and Juggunath Ghat—that were nonexistent in Aaron Upjohn's 1792-3 Map (Figures 1a and 1b). The appearance (and disappearance) of a cluster of ghats at a given moment suggests the emergence of new power brokers.

The extraordinary investment in ghats in colonial cities was related to the importance of the river as the primary artery for trade and communication well into the late nineteenth century. Good roads were few then. While most roads remained unmetalled and impassable for much of the year, river traffic increased manifold. It took decades for the railways to claim a significant part of the



Figure 2: . Prinsep Memorial. Swati Chattopadhyay.

trade that connected upcountry towns with the outgoing ocean trade. At a smaller scale, everyday practices such as collecting water, washing, bathing, conducting religious rituals and leisure activities became connected to potentially large profits from tolls and rents. Tolls from cargo and passenger boats and rents from markets and warehouses built adjacent to the ghats became important sources of income for property owners and middlemen. The richest families in the city vied with docking and export goods companies for a slice of this profitable pie. Some were willing to conduct four decades of litigation to ensure rights of access to the waterfront.⁷

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became reaffirmed in their importance as acts of conspicuous consumption as well as commemoration. The ghats attached to garden houses belonged to the first order, while the

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public ghats built by the elite though primarily intended to serve everyday and economic functions, was undoubtedly about locating one's name in the landscape.

While most ghats named after individuals were the outcome of family patronage (such as

Cossenath Baboo's Ghat, Rooplal Baboo's Ghat, Rammohun Mullick Ghat indicated in the 1825 Lottery Committee Map of Calcutta), at least one ghat named after a prominent individual had little to do with family patronage. This was the Prinsep Ghat in Calcutta built in 1843 (Figure 2). As a commemorative ghat named after James Prinsep, it was built by public subscription and government funds, and yet came to be seen as a site for perpetuating the family name. It is important to note here that very few ghats were named after European individuals, and those such as Colvin Ghat and Jackson Ghat did not carry any conspicuous meaning as works of commemoration. Prinsep Ghat was thus an exception, but its construction gives us a glimpse of the competing constituencies that shaped the riverfront in the colonial city. Prinsep Ghat seemed to have gained a new afterlife in the present-day riverfront development in Kolkata, and is therefore worth a closer look to recognize the process of claiming space in the city's riverfront.

Commemorating James Prinsep

A man of prodigious talent, James Prinsep joined the services of the East India Company as a twenty-year old in 1819, when he was appointed Assistant Assay Master to the Mint at Calcutta. Next year he was promoted to Assay Master and sent to Varanasi. In 1830 he was transferred to the Calcutta Mint and in 1832 he succeeded noted orientalist scholar and civil servant Horace Hayman Wilson to the post of Assay Master. He remained in that position until 1840 when he returned to England because of failing health. A gifted draftsman, he has left numerous paintings and architectural documentation of Varanasi and other historical sites in India (Prinsep, 1831).

He served as Secretary to the Mint Committee and the Asiatic Society of Bengal and was the founding editor of the *Journal of the Asiatic Society* (Laurie, 1887, p.171-74). Among his key contributions were preparing the plans for the drainage and sanitation of Varanasi, deciphering the Kharoshti and Bramhi scripts, as well as manifold research on mineralogy, metallurgy,

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and numismatics. The seventh son of nine siblings, James's brothers –Charles, George, Henry Thoby, William, Thomas, Augustus –served in important capacities in India, the family acquiring deep ties to Calcutta.

When James died in London on April 22, 1840, several memorial meetings were held in Calcutta.⁸ A "great meeting" of about 500 people, chaired by Sir Edward Ryan, was held in the Calcutta Town Hall on 30 July to determine the best manner in which his contribution to India and Calcutta ought to be commemorated (Bengal Catholic Expositor, 1840a, p.10). Three actions were proposed. A committee was formed for the purpose of commemoration, called the James Prinsep Testimonial Committee, which was given the charge of entering into negotiation with the Bengal Government regarding the location and construction of a ghat on the banks of the Hooghly:

“The most appropriate and best monument to his memory would be a spacious and handsome ghaut upon the bank of the noble river, upon a site where it is much wanted and will be extensively useful. The structure will unite, as he did in everything he undertook, what is the most beautiful and engaging, with what is the most useful. Placed at the entrance of the city, it will be the first object that strikes the eyes of those who come from distant lands to visit the capital of British India, while it will be presented daily to the view of the inhabitants, recalling to them, as they take their evening exercise, the recollection of his talents, of his labours, and of his worth.”
(The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register, 1840, p.189)

In addition, a marble bust of James was to be commissioned and placed in the rooms of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta, where it would join the busts of former notables such as William Jones and Henry Thomas Colebrooke. Last but not least, a medal with his effigy and name was to be struck.

It is possible that the suggestion of a ghat as a commemorative monument came from James’s Indian acquaintances and friends. His brother, William, noted that prior to the Town Hall meeting “the natives” conducted a separate meeting and “formed a subscription of their own to build a ghaut [stepped landing] to his memory.” William, partner with William Carr and Dwarakanath Tagore in the firm Carr, Tagore & Company, did not mention who these natives were, despite his closeness to the elite Indian community. His brief recollection projected James Prinsep’s accomplishments commemorated in the form of a riverside ghat as the indelible mark of the Prinsep family name on the landscape:

“The erection of a very neat Palladian Porch at the head of a flight of steps was entrusted to our friend Fitzgerald an officer of the Engineers. It is an ornament to the river [...] My last act in India was to add 2 stone recumbent lions to slope off the stairs which I got well done in Buxar for 700 rupees, but I did not remain long enough to see them in place. It is called Prinsep’s Ghaut so that our name cannot easily be forgotten in India”.
(Losty, 1990, p.112)

It appears from William’s recollection that except for providing the funds to erect the structure, the Indian community had little to do with the decisions that went into the making of the memorial; that is, if the Indian elite were involved in the planning process, it is not acknowledged. But there was more to it. There was considerable debate about the choice of location, the design of such a ghat, its usefulness, and the expense for such an undertaking.

Planning Prinsep Ghat

James Prinsep was much admired by his contemporaries, but the location of the ghat that was to be built invoked contrary opinions from at least two constituencies: the Indian subscribers to the fund, and the Military Board. The Prinsep Testimonial Committee, headed by Mr. Ryan (and then Mr. Grant) chose a site between Fort William and Baboo Ghat, a stretch that had few ghats though it was closer to the administrative center of the town and the fort (**Figure 3**). This location, however, was adjacent to the new drive that had been constructed in the 1820s, and was a favorite place for evening rides (Parks, 1836, p.103). Designed as an introduction to the city to those coming by ship from foreign shores, it was meant to be seen from a distance, and was well within the so-called ‘white’ town (Chattopadhyay, 2000).⁹



Figure 3: Detail of Map of The City and Environs of Calcutta, by P. W. Simms, 1852-56, showing location of Prinsep Ghat, below Fort William, as built.



Figure 4: Detail of Map of The City and Environs of Calcutta, by P. W. Simms, 1852-56, showing the ghats near the Mint on the banks of the Hooghly River.

The committee in a petition to the government argued that the site for the proposed ghat in addition to commemorating James Prinsep could become a designated space for the landing of British troops, who at that time suffered inconvenience from having to wade through the mud to cover the distance between the ship and shore (Grant, 1841). In this the committee anticipated the position of the Bengal Government that had agreed to give a piece of land for erecting the ghat.

Alternative sites had already been discussed prior to this petition. We see a brief news entry in the *Bengal Catholic Expositor* that indicates that Ramkamal Sen, presumably on behalf of the Indian subscribers wanted a site for the ghat in a location further north. Sen wanted the ghat “attached to the spot known by the name of Prinsep’s Garden, opposite the New Mint, than at Cooly bazaar, which from the frequent resort of Europeans as the landing place, Sir J. P. Grant thinks to

be the most appropriate position" (Bengal Catholic Expositor, 1840b, p.26). The location near the New Mint would bring this ghat within the geography of ghats in the "native" part of town (Chattopadhyay, 2000) (Figure 4). It could be seen as a desire to claim James Prinsep as part of that geography, but it would also have primarily linked James's contribution as Assay Master to the commemorative act. The plot known as Prinsep's Garden was an extension of the Mint and not private land; that is, it did not belong to the Prinsep family. A ghat built on that site would have legitimated the temporary possession of a garden plot as a potential claim for permanence.¹⁰ It is likely that the main reason for Sen recommending a site opposite the New Mint was to prevent it from becoming a European preserve and linked to the official functions of the government from which the great majority of the Indian residents were excluded. That Sen did not succeed with this alternate site is obvious, but the Military Board also considered alternative sites suitable for the ghat if indeed the objective was to create a space for the convenience of the troops. The cost incurred in such an undertaking was another consideration.

The design for the ghat proposed by Robert Haldane Rattray, a judge and close friend of James Prinsep, was approved by the Committee of Subscribers, and based on this design Burn and Co. provided an estimate of Rs. 26,000 for construction. The subscribers had raised Rs.16,000 and solicited the Bengal Government to take over the construction of the foundation and steps that would cost Rs.10,000. The committee offered to utilize the funds they had raised from subscription to build a superstructure of "strength and elegance" (Grant, 1841; Fitzgerald, 1841a).

In response, the Bengal Government wanted the committee to place itself in touch with the Military Board that undertook all government civil works so that the Governor General could have the requisite information regarding the size, specification and plan of the proposed ghat (Bushby, 1841a). The government needed to justify any such expense on its part as a matter of "utility and public advantage," and accordingly asked the Military Board to ascertain such utility (Bushby, 1841b). The Military Board, in turn, sought the opinion of its civil architect, Capt. W. R. Fitzgerald, on the suitability of the location and design. He responded by remarking that such a ghat at the proposed site might be useful for the troops but he was not prepared to say that "these objects could not be attained except at an expense such as would be required in laying the foundation of a handsome structure like the proposed plan of the James Prinsep Ghat." He continued by noting that a less imposing structure would be sufficient:

"I am of opinion that a raised earthen causeway from the Strand Road to the river with a sloped facing of stone ballast or of steps of masonry the cost of which probably will be about 2,000 rupees is all that is requisite for the embarkation and disembarkation of troops, and in the consideration of this question advantage is to be taken of any existing Ghaut there is one of this character already nearly finished at the Cooly Bazar which could without any outlay be made suitable for the purposes suggested by the James Prinsep Testimonial Committee."
(Fitzgerald, 1841b)

Fitzgerald did not rule out the usefulness of another ghat that could cater to "large bodies of troops" having to embark, but considered 2,000 rupees sufficient for the purpose (Fitzgerald, 1841b). The Government of Bengal disagreed with

this assessment. A couple of months later Mr. Bushby, Secretary to the Government of Bengal dispatched a memo to the Military Board supporting the proposal of the James Prinsep Testimonial Committee:

"I am directed to acquaint you that although a narrow Ghat for the landing and embarkation of troops near to the Fort without them wading through the mud might be constructed for much less a sum than that proposed, yet in consideration that the Ghat in question will be of great width and afford shelter upon occasions of large landings or embarkation from the sun and rain, that it will be a work of ornament as well as of great public convenience that the class of works is one which is particularly regarded by our native population and that general feeling in favor of so excellent a public officer as the late Mr. James Prinsep may in this manner without inconvenient precedent be gratified, the Right Hon'ble the Governor is pleased to grant from the Public Treasury, the donation of a sum not to exceed Rupees 10,000, towards the construction of the James Prinsep Ghat being two fifths of the estimated cost of the whole work."
(Bushby, 1841c)

Bushby's reference to the "great regard" in which Indians held the construction of ghats was undoubtedly paying heed to the fact they were the primary donors. The government approved the proposed site, but in accordance to the wishes of the Military Board consented to have the garrison engineer work with the committee on the project (Military Board, 1841a). The Governor General also insisted that the government should provide the aid as a donation rather than take on the responsibility of building part of the ghat (Military Board, 1841b). The civil architect and Military Board were likely offended that they were not

initially placed on the Testimonial Committee as "experts" and ensured that from then on they take a seat at the decision-making table in the matter of planning and execution (Military Board, 1841a).

Ghat Design: Then and Now

The idea of a neo-classical porch meant to function as a ghat superstructure was not new, nor was Prinsep Ghat alone in rendering such an architectural effect on the riverfront. Several neo-classical ghats were built before and after

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the construction of Prinsep Ghat in the city and the riverfront suburbs. Neo-classicism was, after all, the favored vocabulary of architecture for ghats, residences, garden houses, and all sorts of public buildings by both Indians and Europeans. However, the porch of the Prinsep Ghat in its spatial logic was only tentatively linked to the stepped landing. It was not a surprise therefore that the committee had deemed appropriate that the construction of the superstructure could be handled somewhat independently of the foundation and the steps. There seemed to have been no particular function designated to the porch, other than that of shelter against the sun and rain. For example, it did not have changing rooms for men and women, fairly common for the other large ghats in the city, because this ghat was not meant for bathing or the performance of religious rituals. And it certainly did not encourage the growth of a market next to it. Meant as a commemorative monument and an "ornament" to the river this structure *happened to be* a ghat, presumably at the suggestion of the



Figure 5: The ghat near the Prinsep Memorial.

Indian subscribers. Some contemporary visitors were less than pleased with the design itself:

“Crowded with heavy pillars, and loaded with even more ponderous wings, its deformity became so apparent as the structure rose that, although building by private subscription, the Governor-General interfered, and ordered that the work should proceed no further until improved in its design! This was effected, and it was then pointed out (which all the engineers had overlooked) that it was placed nearer the fort than the rules of fortification justified.”
(Johnson, 1843, p.18)

George Johnson, who penned this impression in 1843, attributed the misguided aesthetics to the absence of architectural knowledge in the city. Neither the military engineers nor the private gentlemen, among whom he could count the designer Mr. Rattray, had sufficient knowledge of the rules of neo-classicism, he pointed out. The design, Johnson noted sarcastically, would immortalize Prinsep’s genius as well as Rattray’s ignorance.

The ultimate problem with the Prinsep Ghat was that the river began to move away leaving the steps high and dry. The construction of the New Strand Road at the turn of the century completed the separation of the monument and the ghat, and

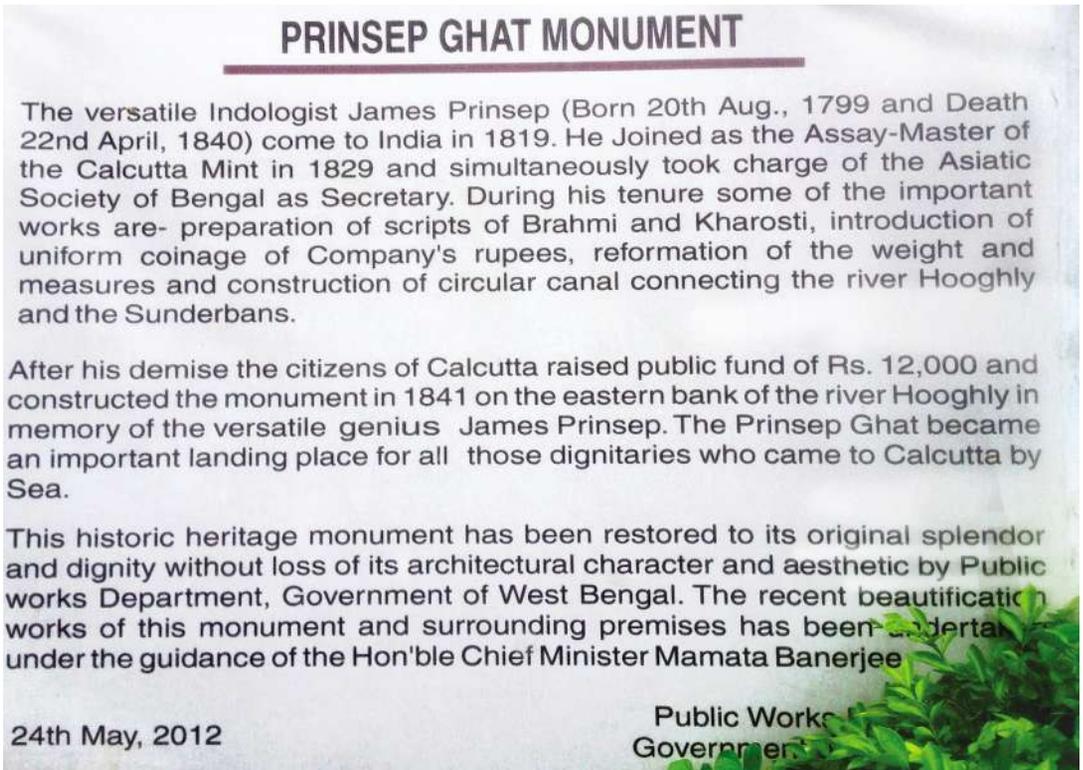


Figure 6: Plaque at the Prinsep Memorial, Kolkata.

in a strange way exposed its split design logic: the Prinsep memorial and Prinsep ghat became two distinct artifacts (Figure 5). It is thus ironic that Prinsep Ghat—that has ceased to be a ghat for over a century—now in the shadow of the Vidyasagar Setu, the new bridge on the Hoogly river, was chosen as the anchor point for the new riverfront development plan. As if bereft of its original rationale, it could be invested with a new set of meanings.

For the city's upper classes, ghats have ceased to have the kind the importance they garnered as social spaces between the eighteenth and early twentieth century. Writing five decades ago, Bengali writer Syed Mujtaba Ali had

remarked: “Why has bathing in the Ganges gone out of fashion, because the virtuous do not build new ghats any more.” (Ali, 1994, p.319).

If ghats still appear as figures in the discourse on riverfront development, they appear in a somewhat different guise. In Kolkata, as the focus of riverfront development turns to a global touristic gaze, we see attention lavished on a few monuments such as the Prinsep Ghat and the southern stretch of the riverside approach, while the great majority of the ghats, some of which are older than Prinsep Ghat and have impressive superstructures, suffer neglect in a pattern that mimics a much older legacy of colonial urban development with its class and racial parsing of

space. Equally important is the contemporary design treatment that turns the river into a scene, a view, rather than a point of access.

Launched in 2007, Kolkata's riverfront redevelopment scheme remains in essence a beautification project, primarily consisting of a promenade extending from Prinsep Ghat to Armenian Ghat. Presumably there is the promise of a longer stretch to come, and last year a new scheme with the aid of World Bank has been proposed. As Kolkata's municipal and port authorities and the middle-class public make new claims on an old

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front—and at least one official reportedly said that they have poured over old sepia photographs for “reconstruction”—it might be useful to reflect more carefully on the history of the riverfront (Sircar, 2014). At least that might suffice to revise the incorrect information presented on the plaque next to the monument (Figure 6). But beyond that, an historical investigation of the architecture and planning of the ghats might offer salutary design lessons for the future. ■

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Notes:

¹ Calcutta was the capital of British India until 1911 when a new capital was announced to be created in Delhi. Calcutta was renamed as Kolkata in 2001. In this essay, I retain the earlier name when referring to the colonial times and employ the changed name

when referring to the present day city, the capital of the Indian state of Bengal (formerly West Bengal).

² By colonial city I am referring to cities established during European colonial rule to facilitate colonial trade and administration. These were quite distinct from pre-colonial cities such as Varanasi, founded before the advent of European powers.

³ “*Ganga'r pashim kul Baranasi samatul*” in Bengali literally translates as “the west bank of Ganga is analogous to Varanasi.”

⁴ Proceedings of the Bengal Legislative Council, 17th March 1925, cited in *Jomdattar Diary*, 74.

⁵ For a discussion of colonial picturesque, see Archer (1980); Chattopadhyay (2005); Tobin (1999).

⁶ See *Plan of the City of Calcutta* by Lt. Col Mark Wood, published by William Baillie, 1784-85, and *The City and Environs of Calcutta* by P. W. Simms, 1852-56.

⁷ This included families such as the Debs of Sobhabazar and the Mullicks of Pathuriaghata.

⁸ One of these was the meeting at the Asiatic Society on July 1. Proceedings of the Asiatic Society, Wed Evening, 1st July, 1840, *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol IX, no 99 (Jan-June, 1840), 336-38.

⁹ The notion of ‘white’ and ‘black’ towns in Calcutta was not stable, and such designations in some instances miss the complexity of a colonial city. See Chattopadhyay (2000) for this argument.

¹⁰ The municipal authorities were constantly attempting to refrain European companies and Indian constituencies from turning temporary occupation of the riverbank into permanent claims.

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