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Urbanising Uttarpara

Philanthropy, Improvement, Education,
c. 1846 to c. 1865

*Akash Bhattacharya**

Gadi ghoda phuler toda / ei tin nie Uttarpara
(Vehicles, horses, bouquets / the three make up Uttarpara).¹

If any town or village is ambitious of attracting the applause of the Majesty of Great Britain in India, Who is greater than even the Emperor of Delhi was in his palmiest day of glory, it must first deserve, by the means by which Ooterparah has been reclaimed from mud village into a smiling garden, the splendid honour.

—Mary Carpenter, *Six Months in India* (1868)

The loss is not personal, it affects the whole [of] India which has lost a statesman, politician, patriot, and philanthropist.

—Prince Muhammad Bakhtiyar Shah, on the death of Joykrishna Mukherjee (S. Mukherjee 2009)

The middle of the nineteenth century witnessed the rapid growth of municipal towns in British India. Act 26 of 1850 provided for the establishment of municipalities if two-thirds of the inhabitants of a locality applied for it.

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According to the Act, municipal responsibilities included conservation, road repairs, lighting, the framing of by-laws and their enforcement by means of fines, and the levying of indirect taxes. Thereafter, rudimentary municipal organisations emerged in 352 towns and villages in the Bombay Province. In Bengal, there were only four – Serampore, Uttarpara, Nasirabad and Sherpore – but numbers increased rapidly after the passage of the District Municipal Improvement Act (1864), the District Town Act (1868) and the Bengal Municipal Act (1876). By 1881, Bengal had 138 municipal boards (Tinker 1968). In south Bengal, the fifty-mile radius around the metropolis of Calcutta (now Kolkata) contained a large concentration of new municipalities. Across the river from Calcutta, along the riparian tract on the west bank of the Hooghly River, spatially contiguous municipalities emerged north of Howrah. Stretching across Howrah and Hooghly districts, Howrah, Uttarpara, Kotrung, Serampore, Baidyabati, Bhadreswar, Hooghly-Chinsurah and Bansberia formed a series of contiguous municipalities running from south to north.² While the trajectories of urbanisation in the nearby metropolis are well documented, less is known about similar changes on the western bank of the Hooghly River. At first glance, the transformation of these municipalities seems generally to relate to industrialisation, trade and transportation systems, as well as their geographical proximity to Calcutta (Gillion 1968; Sengupta 2020). Closer examination reveals distinct but interconnected histories of agriculture, industry, transport, philanthropy and education.

In this chapter, I examine the causes and patterns of urbanisation in Uttarpara, one of the eight west bank municipalities, in the middle of the nineteenth century. I argue that, under conditions produced by the Permanent Settlement of 1793 and the Wood's Despatch of 1854, Uttarpara's *nagarayan* (urbanisation) crystallised out of the interconnected operations of philanthropic capital in agriculture and education. In the process, Uttarpara emerged, towards the end of the century, as a municipal town that was not yet convincingly urban – a 'fluid space' with finely calibrated relationships with the metropolis on the one hand and the rural hinterland on the other. This chapter shows how the urbanising aspirations of the local landholding elite led to the physical and social transformation of Uttarpara, producing a municipality in 1853 and consolidating the demographic and social power of the Bengali urban middle class (*bhadralok*) over the space of the erstwhile *gandagram* (obscure village).

My focus is on the early years of the transformation of Uttarpara³ from a cluster of hamlets in the northern corner of a village called Bally into a place of steady *nagarayan*.⁴ A bridge connecting Uttarpara to neighbouring Bally and an English-medium school, both inaugurated in 1846, were the first

milestones on the road to urbanisation. In the years that followed, the urbanising aspirations of the local landholding elite resulted in the physical and social transformation of Uttarpara, producing the municipality in 1853 (suspended in 1862, only to be reconstituted and stabilised in 1865) and consolidating the demographic and social power of the Bengali *bhadralok* over the space of the erstwhile *gandagram*.

This chapter analyses the nature of these changes and argues that under the conditions produced by the Permanent Settlement, Uttarpara's *nagarāyan* crystallised out of the interconnected operations of philanthropic capital in agriculture and education. In the histories of urbanism in India, the role of philanthropy in urbanisation and the making of public cultures have been examined through the examples of Bombay (present-day Mumbai) and thriving precolonial trading centres such as Surat (Dobbin 1972; Chopra 2011; Haynes 1992). My study of Uttarpara is meant to be an important addition to this body of work.

A Gandagram in Transition

Towards the end of 1845, Joykrishna Mukherjee and his younger brother Raj Krishna Mukherjee – Joykrishna's later adversary in municipal power politics – sent an application to G. F. Cockburn, the magistrate of Howrah, proposing the establishment of an English-medium school for the villages of Uttarpara, Konnagar and Bally. The brothers assured the magistrate that they were ready to make a permanent endowment of landed property yielding a monthly income of 100 rupees for the school. As a further mark of support, they claimed, the people of Uttarpara and the adjacent village of Bhadrakali had raised, respectively, 2,000 rupees and 220 rupees already, while 5,000 rupees had been promised by Bally and Konnagar for the same purpose. Cockburn strongly supported the proposal. The government agreed on a monthly grant which, along with the gift of the Mukherjees and the school fees, was deemed adequate to support the institution. The Uttarpara Government School was opened on 15 May 1846 and placed under the management of the Local Committee of Public Instruction in Howrah, of which Joykrishna Mukherjee was appointed a member (N. Mukherjee 1975: 80–150).

Infrastructural developments took off in Uttarpara at around the same time. The Mukherjees and their associates started canvassing opinions in favour of a safe and ready means of transit between Calcutta and the opposite river bank. The newly constituted Landholders' Association, of which Joykrishna Mukherjee was an active member, supported Joykrishna Mukherjee's call for a bridge to

be built across the Hooghly River. The government rejected that demand but approved a small-scale bridging project instead. Instead of connecting with Calcutta, Uttarpara was allowed to connect by a bridge with neighbouring Bally, which effectively gave it a direct land route into the thriving mercantile centre of Howrah. Uttarpara had been geographically separated from Bally proper by a *khal*, or creek, extending from the Dankuni marsh west of Serampore to the Hooghly River. As an active member of the Hooghly District Ferry Fund Committee, Joykrishna Mukherjee had observed the recent rise in traffic across the creek in line with the expansion of trading activity along the west bank. In 1842, he proposed the establishment of an iron suspension bridge over this *khal* in Bally. In his letter to the secretary of the Ferry Fund Committee on 19 July 1842, he argued that the bridge would be of great advantage to local agriculture, making it possible for farmers effectively to market their produce as far as Howrah (N. Mukherjee 1975: 80–150). The government accepted the proposal and construction work on the bridge began in 1844.

The inauguration of the bridge on 3 February 1846 was a spectacular occasion. On display was not simply the bridge but an entire paradigm of improvement enabled by the Permanent Settlement of 1793 (R. Guha 2017).⁵ The bridge was opened by H. T. Maddock, the deputy governor of Bengal. The formal opening ceremony and the public trial of the bridge drew a large crowd (some of them presumably local peasants) despite the drizzle. The deputy governor arrived as a 17-gun salute was fired from a battery on the west bank of the *khal*, walked along the bridge and returned to the same side. After the bridge's solidity had been demonstrated, local representatives of Bally, Uttarpara and Konnagar, led by Joykrishna Mukherjee, gave an address to the deputy governor in which Joykrishna Mukherjee repeated his earlier remarks on the usefulness of the bridge to local agriculture and to transport in the area. In his reply, the deputy governor congratulated the local people for their initiative and singled out Joykrishna Mukherjee for praise. Holding him up as an example and extolling his efforts in building the bridge and the school in the same breath, Maddock appealed to *zamindars* (landowners) all over Bengal to get involved in similar undertakings. Thanking Joykrishna Mukherjee repeatedly for his endowment fund for the Uttarpara school, Maddock said he hoped that the institution would perpetuate his name in the neighbourhood as a public benefactor (N. Mukherjee 1975: 201–202).

Maddock's invocation of the school and the bridge as the twin symbols of civilisational progress was in keeping with the official zeitgeist (Mehta 2007). Under the terms of the Permanent Settlement, *zamindars* were, in principle,

supposed to increase agricultural profits and turn those profits into social and cultural assets in the form of civic associations, educational institutions and rural and urban infrastructure. Liberal progress, as applicable to the colony, envisioned that such improvements would filter downwards: *zamindars*, it was hoped, would not only initiate such change but also paternally acculturate people into accepting and desiring it. These improving *zamindars* were potential allies for a state that was increasingly looking for ways to penetrate the countryside.

The two decades that followed the drizzly morning of the inauguration of the bridge witnessed a rapid expansion of physical infrastructure, financed in part by the state and in part by Joykrishna Mukherjee, his family and their allies in the village. By 1865, Uttarpara had a dispensary (1851), a public library (1859), metalled roads, motorised water-carrying vehicles, streetlamps, cemented *ghats* and bazaars, public latrines and cemented drains, European-style residential buildings, and, of course, the municipality (1852). It had several civic associations in the form of the Vernacular Literature Society, the Temperance Society, the welfare-oriented Uttarpara Hitokary Sabha and a local journal by the name of *Uttarpara Patrika*.

Philanthropic investments by the Mukherjee family played a key role in these developments. Over and above their financial investment in the school and the bridge, Joykrishna and Raj Krishna Mukherjee paid 1,800 rupees towards the initial cost of setting up the dispensary and half the cost – amounting to 4,000 rupees – for the construction of the dispensary building; the other half was paid by the government. Joykrishna Mukherjee alone contributed the largest amount for the library (80,000 rupees) building and garden and an annual 1,900 rupees towards the library's running costs (Khastgir 2009). The library was built entirely with private subscriptions spearheaded by Joykrishna Mukherjee, while the Uttarpara Hitokary Sabha was chiefly the handiwork of Joykrishna Mukherjee's stepbrother, Bijoy Krishna Mukherjee.

Philanthropists in Power

The Mukherjee family may have sown the seeds in the 'smiling garden', as described by Mary Carpenter (1868), but Uttarpara's subsequent prosperity was down to careful nurturing by like-minded local inhabitants, who formed the consumer base for the new infrastructure projects. Residents beyond the Mukherjee family contributed to Uttarpara's transition by financial investments, political allyship and supplying manpower to operate the new projects. In the process, the philanthropists and their allies together assumed unprecedented power over life in what rapidly ceased to be a *gandagram*. Local histories list other

local Brahmin landholding families, such as those of Pearymohan Mukhopadhyay, Shibnarayan Mukhopadhyay, Ambikacharan Mukhopadhyay, Rai Bahadur Sarat Chattopadhyay, Jyotikumar Mukhopadhyay, Suresh Mukhopadhyay, Narendranath Mukhopadhyay and Jitendranath Mukhopadhyay as prominent contributors, though the exact extent of their financial contributions remains unclear (S. Mukhopadhyay 2009: 511–546). While the bulk of these investments seem to have been made in infrastructure and civic institutions, some of them invested in local religious establishments at the same time. One Haranath Chattopadhyay, who had earned a substantial sum by selling ammunition to the army, is known to have contributed towards cementing the river *ghat*, besides endowing an annual amount of 12,000 rupees towards a newly built Ramchandra Jiu temple (Mitra 1958: 1239).

The allyship of like-minded inhabitants came to the fore in the supplementary initiatives that they undertook. Karunamoy Bandyopadhyay took charge of the local Temperance Society, Harihar Mukhopadhyay of the Uttarpara Hitokary Sabha, while local educated Brahmins, particularly the Mukherjee family, dominated the day-to-day running of the municipality (S. Mukhopadhyay 2009: 511–546). When the reconstituted municipality met in 1865, three out of the six commissioners appointed belonged to local Brahmin families outside of Joykrishna Mukherjee's family: these were Harishchandra Bandyopadhyay, Tarak Nath Chattopadhyay and Jagabandhu Bandyopadhyay (Bandyopadhyay 2009). The allyships came to the rescue when new projects required financial bailouts. In 1880, families other than that of Joykrishna raised 300 rupees to bail out the ailing dispensary (S. Mukhopadhyay 2009: 530).⁶ Financial investments and the municipal participation of a specific section of local inhabitants increased their control over the social life of Uttarpara. When the municipality was set up in 1852, a section of inhabitants agreed to pay the *chowkidari* tax⁷ but not the municipal tax (Bandyopadhyay 2009: 565). And yet the pro-municipality group managed to get their way and pushed through a municipal tax. From 1865 onwards, despite local protests, the municipal tax on houses was assessed at 7.5 per cent, which was the highest among the west bank municipalities (O'Malley and Chakravarti 1912: 227). Local historians have recorded rumours about oppressive and violent methods of tax collection (Carstairs 1912: 86–87). Between 1887–1888 and 1899–1900, there was a 19 per cent rise in tax collection despite a mere 12 per cent rise in population (O'Malley and Chakravarti 1909: 227).

Culturally, the reformist leanings of Joykrishna Mukherjee and his allies seem to have held considerable sway over Uttarpara, even in the early years of their

association with social reform such as women's education and widow remarriage. In 1850, a girl educated at Bethune College in Calcutta married into an Uttarpara family. When some of the inhabitants protested, Ambikacharan Mukhopadhyay, a supporter of widow remarriage and female education, summoned a meeting of household heads and voted out the protesting group by 91 to 9 (Basu 2009: 429). It is not clear, however, whether meetings such as these followed traditional local decision-making practices, such as *ekjote* and *dharmaghat*, or modern democratic methods (Sanyal 1980).⁸ Nor do we know how regular such meetings were, or whether consultations of this sort were widely held on multiple municipal and social issues. Emerging civic problems were not necessarily solved through prompt public action. As late as 1876, the public latrines regularly seemed to fall into disrepair. Further, despite examples of concerted action, it would be incorrect to see these philanthropist powerholders and their allies as a homogenous group, either in terms of their socio-cultural outlook or their attitudes towards municipal development. In the 1870s, faction feuds broke out between Joykrishna's allies and those of Bijoy Krishna and Raj Krishna over municipal affairs, such as the establishment of the Ganges Valley Bone Mill. However, during the early years of the municipality there seems to have been enough unity among the critical mass to push through the projects that decisively transformed Uttarpara.

The social dominance of the largely Brahmin philanthropists, social reformers, educators and municipal powerholders also seem to have gradually altered the demographics of the place, either by the eviction of 'low' castes or by their relegation to the spatial margins of the municipality, thus making it a Brahmin stronghold. Writing in 1857, the local historian Bhagabanchandra Mukhopadhyay noted that out of a total of 495 households in Uttarpara, 137 were Brahmin, 75 were Sadgope (herders and cultivators) and 33 Kumbhakar (potters), giving local Brahmins a huge majority over 'low'-caste groups (B. Mukhopadhyay 1857: 59–60).⁹ This was in sharp contrast to the folkloric impression of the old village as a stronghold of agriculturalists and fisherfolk prior to its transformation under colonial and nationalist modernising processes (S. Mukhopadhyay 2009: 557–561). Bijoy Krishna Mukherjee's account of Uttarpara's demographics, written in 1858, contains similar indications of Brahmin caste power (S. Mukhopadhyay 2009).¹⁰ He wrote that three Brahmin clans – Sabarno Brahmins, Chaital Chattopadhyays and Kulin Brahmins – occupied the bulk of the physical space of the municipality.¹¹ Manual labourers, working as domestic labour, railway workers, boat makers or ferry service workers, were crammed in *bastis* or slums, alongside sex workers, on the southern side of Uttarpara. Sanjaykumar Mukhopadhyay has pointed out that this socio-spatial configuration contrasted

with that of the neighbouring village of Bhadrakali, which at that time had prominent localities of 'low' occupational castes such as Telis (oilpressers), Tambulis (betel leaf sellers), Gowalas (cattle herders), Sutradhars (carpenters) and Kansaris (brassware manufacturers) (S. Mukhopadhyay 2009: 512–519). The new physical infrastructures and civic associations enabled the local *bhadralok* to consolidate social networks with European officers, the Calcutta *bhadralok* and like-minded rural *zamindars* (Larkin 2013: 327–343).

Local associations and learned societies played a key role in initiating modernisation through social reform. The Uttarpara Hitokary Sabha emerged as a key social reform initiative in the latter half of the 1860s, spearheading domestic education for women in south Bengal. Within a decade of its birth (1863), the *sabha* was recognised by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) as an authority on female education across Burdwan, Hooghly and Howrah. At that time, the *sabha* ran a girls' school in Uttarpara and conducted examinations for women taking instruction in private. Such activities allowed the local civil society to connect with like-minded reformist *zamindars* across a 50-mile radius around Calcutta who had opened schools for girls in their respective estates: Kashishwar Mitra in Sukhsagar, Sibchandra Deb in Konnagar, Prasannakumar Mazumdar in Baruipur, Rajkumar and Kalikumar Roychowdhury in Janbazar, Raj Krishna Bandyopadhyay in Kharda, and so on. The Vernacular Literary Society, set up in 1851, boasted noted missionaries, government officials and Indian reformers connected to education among its members: J. E. D. Bethune, founder of the first women's college in Bengal; Joshua Marshman of the Baptist Missionary Society; Henry Woodrow, who later became the director of public instruction in Bengal; and influential social reformer Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, among others.

Mimicking urban facilities in largely rural settings, the Uttarpara Public Library had a residential floor and an attached garden, which often hosted governors, poets and social reformers from across the river, as they travelled from the metropolis to other parts of the province for professional or other purposes. Counting visitors and guests as prominent as viceroys and governor generals, John Lawrence, the marquis of Dufferin, and Ashley Eden, among others, and poet Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and the early Congress nationalist Surendranath Bannerjee among Indians, the library became a networking site for the local civil society. Occasionally, Joykrishna Mukherjee held dinner parties in the garden for high-ranking government officials, with food from the Great Eastern Hotel across the river being served. Like the inauguration of the Bally Bridge in 1846, these parties were spectacular demonstrations of

Uttarpara's new status within the British Empire in India as a paragon of improvement. Understandably, knowledge of English played a crucial mediating role in the process. To grasp the precise nature of that role, it is essential to situate the operation of philanthropic capital in Uttarpara within the historical context of the Permanent Settlement. I do so in the following section, by looking at the career of Uttarpara's chief philanthropist, Joykrishna Mukherjee.

Joykrishna Mukherjee's Capital Bargain

On the drizzly morning of 3 February 1846, H. T. Maddock identified Joykrishna Mukherjee as a potentially exemplary *zamindar*, long before obituaries by Englishmen and Indians alike eulogised his career. In his speech at the new Bally Bridge, when Maddock wished for Joykrishna's fame as a public benefactor to spread far and wide, this was hardly an unremarkable compliment. Mukherjee's acquisition of land, investment in expanding revenues and eager deployment of the capital gained by agricultural expansion in philanthropy marked him out as the type of *zamindar* the state wanted to associate with. Mukherjee did not belong to a traditional landholding family. Rather, he was a 'career *zamindar*', who had chosen land management as his vocation.

The possibility of making agriculture more profitable by the cultivation of cash crops, the recovery of rent-free lands and the reclamation of marshlands were the incentives that drove him and those of his ilk towards purchasing land in mid-nineteenth-century Bengal. The fall of agency houses and the consequent setback suffered by Indian mercantile capital supplied the immediate impetus: both Joykrishna and his father were known to have lost money in the agency houses. The opportunity was presented by the failure of the traditional *zamindars* in south Bengal to make the necessary adjustments in agricultural practices and/or revenue administration before the sunset laws – setting the deadline for revenue payments, failing which lands were liable to be sold – came into force. Joykrishna purchased two *zamindari* estates from Srinath Ray of the Seoraphuli Raj in 1832. This appears to have been his first personal investment in land.

At that time, Mukherjee's family owned little more than the house they lived in Uttarpara. In fact, most of his estates were in the rural hinterland of the emerging west bank cluster of municipalities. From the sixteenth century onwards, following the gradual silting up of the Satgaon port downstream, economic activity had shifted up the Hooghly River. The *zamindars* of Seoraphuli sought to expand agriculture and populate these rural tracts. They proactively settled prosperous Brahmin families from elsewhere in south Bengal in the Bally–Uttarpara region in the early eighteenth century. Thus, the northern

corner of Bally village, which had so far been inhabited by Kaivarta agriculturists and fishermen and Muslim boatmen, started receiving Brahmin families – Chattopadhyays, Bandyopadhyays and Mukhopadhyays – with their entourages of scholars, intellectuals, astrologers, priests and other artisan communities. The Mukherjee family was one of those Kulin Brahmin families who had settled there at the behest of the powerful eighteenth-century *zamindars* of the region, the Sabarno Roychowdhuries, who had earlier arrived from Barrackpore. The strong presence of Brahmins, in turn, enabled Bally to emerge as an important centre of Sanskrit learning (O'Malley and Chakravarti 1909: 188–196). These traditional education practices prospered in close physical proximity to emerging centres of missionary education during a historical phase of considerable interaction between the two (Kopf 1969).

The pattern of settlement of the Sabarno Roychowdhuries paralleled contemporary trends in Calcutta. The opulent households of prominent families – the Setts, the Basaks and the Debs – tended to attract clusters of service people. These households steadily purchased landed property and set up bazaars, which quickly displaced the old village hamlets as the nerve centre of Calcutta. Unlike the prominent Calcutta families though, the Sabarno Roychowdhuries were not known to have had major investments in mercantile capital. They focused on the expansion of agriculture in the hinterland and continued the settlement of Brahmin families in Uttarpara. Ratneshwar Ray of the Sabarno Roychowdhury family is known to have invited Joykrishna's grandfather to settle there. But by the time Joykrishna entered adulthood, the Permanent Settlement had changed land acquisition patterns in rural Bengal, while the East India Company offered new forms of employment. Born in 1808, Joykrishna was a product of this changed economic milieu.

Joykrishna began his career as an East India Company servant: first in the military, then in the judiciary and finally in the revenue department. He had learned English in a family school run by the Seoraphuli *zamindars*, and this helped him gain employment with the Company. In the military, he was first employed as a chief clerk in the Brigade Major's office at the age of 16. In 1824, both he and his father were involved in the Bharatpur campaign, after which each was rewarded handsomely with a sum of 28,000 rupees. It was this money that went into his first land purchase in 1832. From 1837 onwards, he devoted himself fully to the management of his estates, which were steadily expanding, and simultaneously considered investing in education and infrastructure. By 1851, he had purchased 133,330 acres of land stretching across Hooghly, Burdwan and Howrah districts, which yielded an annual revenue of

750,000 rupees. It was the rising income from his estates that he readily directed into infrastructural, educational and literary projects. In other words, he used his professional earnings, obtained early in his life, to buy his first piece of land, and then increased his income and invested the profits in a range of public projects (N. Mukherjee 1975: 1–56).

Understandably, increasing his agricultural income remained one of Joykrishna's key concerns throughout his life. A glance at the list of his 'public benefactions and charities' towards the end of his life reveals large expenditure on building roads, embankments and tanks, famine relief and occasionally remitting rents to *ryots* (cultivators of land). Of the total amount mentioned in Table 1.1, approximately 39.69 per cent of his investments were in these areas, thus directly or indirectly connected to agriculture. He collaborated with the government in the reclamation of the Dankuni and Rajapur marshes, paid 10,000 rupees in 1880 to build the Eden Canal, had 60 to 70 village ponds dug for irrigation, and invested heavily in building embankments because of the tendency of the Damodar River to flood. After the Bally Bridge was opened in 1846, Joykrishna contributed half of the 19,000 rupees that were spent on metalling the Salkia–Serampore road. He later made financial contributions towards the building of roads between Chinsura and Dhaniakhali, Hooghly and Dwarbasini, Pandua and Kalna, Serampore and Chanditala, Narai and Nityanandapur, Bally station and Janai, and Bardhaman and Katwa. These roads greatly aided transportation across the agrarian tracts which formed the hinterland of the eight west bank municipalities (Pal 2009).

Thus, Maddock's perception of Joykrishna as a rising improving *zamindar* turned out to be in part correct. If one of the things that the government wanted from *zamindars* of his ilk at times of rebellion was loyalty – in addition to investment in agricultural expansion – that was readily available from the philanthropists of Uttarpara. While critical of the practices of European indigo planters – former slave drivers in the Americas who brutally compelled farmers in Eastern India to cultivate indigo for commercial purposes – Joykrishna maintained a calculated silence during the farmers' revolt against the planters (the Indigo Rebellion of 1859). The fact that indigo was hardly cultivated on his estates seems to have helped his position. His display of loyalty towards the government was most remarkable, however, during the Revolt of 1857. Under the leadership of Bijoy Krishna Mukherjee and Haranath Chattopadhyay, and with support from Joykrishna Mukherjee, more than a hundred residents of Uttarpara, Bhadrakali, Kotrang, Konnagar and surrounding areas wrote to the district magistrate of Hooghly assuring him of their complete loyalty and

proposing to raise volunteers for a 500-strong private militia under European command to fight the *sepoys* (soldiers) in the event of their arrival in the vicinity. The letter stated:

Private individuals will not entrust their lives and property to men (sepoys) who have proved unfaithful to the best master they could have served and have been audacious enough to rise against the authority of Government, the consequence will be that out of sheer necessity they will be obliged to commit plunder and robbery and other crimes to support themselves. (S. Mukhopadhyay 2009: 534)¹²

Yet Joykrishna's relationship with the government was not always smooth. As the nineteenth century progressed, doubts about the long-term profitability of agriculture under the Permanent Settlement crept in among the government as well as the *zamindars*. Against this backdrop, a significant section of Bengali *zamindars*, through their institutionalised associational power in the form of the Landholders' Association and, later, the British India Association (1851), challenged government policies on tenancy reforms and the imposition of road and education cesses.¹³ Joykrishna was active in both these associations and emerged as an important critic of the government's estate management. He publicly defended his own methods against frequent accusations of oppressive rent extraction levelled by cultivators in his estates throughout his career as a *zamindar*, and against allegations of large-scale resumption of rent-free tenures including those held by Brahmins (N. Mukherjee 1975: 575–609).

Clashes with the government spilled over into education policy. Mukherjee remained a vocal advocate of the Grants-in-Aid system, which enabled *zamindari* philanthropy in education, against criticisms of its inadequacies from both government and Bengali civil society. By the 1860s, voices grew in favour of more direct government intervention in the extension of school education. The *zamindars* were correctly seen as sometimes not proactive enough, while at other times ready to appropriate the Grants-in-Aid system to suit their class interests by promoting English-language education and strengthening their symbolic capital. Mukherjee, while acknowledged as a generous investor in education, was nevertheless perceived as someone keen on such appropriation, earning him the epithet – supposedly accorded by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar – of the *sahib zamindar* (S. Mukhopadhyay 2009: 541)!

Education Strategies

If close to 40 per cent of the *sahib zamindar's* benefactions at the end of his life were directed towards agricultural projects, a similar proportion (35–40 per cent) went

into building educational and literary institutions (see Table 1.1). Mukherjee's maximum investment was in two institutions, each of which benefitted the local *bhadralok*: the English-medium Uttarpara Government School and the Uttarpara Public Library. He also partially funded 10 Anglo-vernacular schools and 14 vernacular schools under the Grants-in-Aid scheme, but none of them were in Uttarpara.¹⁴ In addition, he financed a short-lived agricultural school in Makhla village to train local farmers in techniques of cultivating selected crops on the model of the Agri-Horticultural Society, founded by the missionary educator William Carey in 1818, of which Joykrishna had been a member. Mukherjee also earmarked the municipality for an agricultural college for advanced learning in cultivation techniques, but this never materialised. A vernacular school did open in Uttarpara in 1850, but it struggled to survive financially, unlike the English-medium school, which thrived. Despite rising fees, the number of students on its roll grew throughout the decade (*Report on Public Instruction* 1858: 293). In 1878, the municipality debated whether to bail out the vernacular school, but this was rejected by the majority, including Joykrishna (S. Mukhopadhyay 2009: 528).

Table 1.1 Public benefactions and charities of Joykrishna Mukherjee at the time of his death

Heads	Amount
Value of half of the property endowed for the maintenance of the Uttarpara English School	15,000
Value of half the property endowed for the maintenance of the Uttarpara dispensary cum hospital	22,000
Cost of the public library building at Uttarpara	57,000
Cost of furniture and books for the public library	45,700
Value of the property endowed for the maintenance of the public library	57,500
Cost of embankments and roads	85,397
Cost of tanks excavated in his estates	102,182
Contribution to other schools and dispensaries	25,468
Contribution to famine and other relief funds	6,207
Donations to <i>pandits</i>	7,017
Contribution for medical relief	4,399
Subscription in aid of various societies and charitable funds	36,497
Remission of rents given to <i>raiyats</i> in 1867	12,110
Remission of rents given to <i>raiyats</i> in 1874–1875	13,506
Total	552,739

Source: *Hindoo Patriot* of 23 July 1888 (P. Chattopadhyay 2009: 653–657).

Educational arrangements in Uttarpara and its surrounding hinterland were a product of Wood's Despatch (1854), which proposed a bilingual system to facilitate cultural translation and regulate socio-economic mobility. In brief, the system operated by making a conceptual distinction between the taught curriculum and the medium of instruction. Animated by the liberal imagination of civilisational progress, with education as its vehicle, the despatch 'emphatically' declared the instruction of Indians in European knowledge to be the aim of all education in India (Richey 1922: 366). European knowledge was to be available in English as it was the source of ideas. While the content of learning would be drawn from Europe, Indian vernaculars would have a key role to play in carrying European knowledge in translation to the people. This origin-carrier relation between English and the vernaculars in turn shaped the institutional structure of school education. The despatch created a three-tier school system – *zillah* (district) schools were at the top, below these were the Anglo-vernacular schools and the vernacular schools lay at the bottom of this hierarchy. The functions of each tier are explained as follows.

A few English-medium *zillah* schools, financed and managed by the government, were meant to impart training in European ideas to a few people.¹⁵ In the Anglo-vernacular schools, English was to be taught only as a language, while the rest of the instruction was to be in the vernacular. These schools were meant to create a group of people who were familiar with both the English language and vernacular translations of European knowledge. The vernacular schools (either newly established ones or improved traditional rural elementary schools called *pathshalas*), which were tasked with imparting instruction in European knowledge through the medium of the vernacular, were to be widely spread in large numbers through the social landscape. These were the vehicles for the instruction of the general population. The urge to reaffirm the existing agrarian socio-economic structure by teaching people 'suited to every station in life' and enabling regulated entry into new professions guided the educational imagination in the Wood's Despatch (Richey 1922: 374). The combined thrust towards regulated mobility and calibrated translation together defined the template of 'downward filtration' of knowledge (Sen 1997).¹⁶ The philanthropist *zamindars* of Bengal emerged as important actors in this field.

The government sought to draw in the *zamindars*, partly to relieve the government of shouldering the full financial burden of education and partly to cement the latter's alliance with the former. The DPI's annual report for the year 1858–1859 identified the new village-level allies as 'landowning families, trader castes, scribes and the like which stood between the agricultural population and

the educated classes employed in professions in the cities and Sudder stations'; in brief, the 'middle classes' (*Report on Public Instruction* 1859: 83). The government tried to encourage them to partially finance schools in their estates and allowed them to hold decision-making powers in school management through local committees. The DPI ensured that acts of philanthropy received wide coverage in the *Education Gazette*, a journal started by Bhudev Mukherjee during his time as an assistant sub-inspector of schools with strong encouragement from the DPI.¹⁷ This, in turn, enabled the philanthropists to project themselves as benevolent patrons and social leaders.¹⁸

The new arrangement was superimposed onto the older system of *tols* (institutions of Sankritic higher learning) and *pathshalas* (institutions of elementary education), leading to a period of competition between the two systems. In the early years of Uttarpara's *nagarayan*, the local philanthropists, who were often products of traditional education and maintained their patronage of it, reconfigured post-Wood's Despatch policies in ways that made Uttarpara the urbanised headquarters and residential centre of the landholding *bhadralok* families with estates in the hinterland. English-medium education allowed the circulation of people in ways that enabled the social reproduction of the local *bhadralok* and enabled a transition to government service (Sarkar 1998: 216–282).¹⁹ Local boys educated in the Uttarpara Government School sometimes took up municipal positions, either after attending school or after higher education in Serampore or Calcutta. Some of the first members of the municipality – namely Jagabandhu Bandyopadhyay and Taraknath Chattopadhyay – had studied in the government school. Students moving out for higher education helped strengthen local connections with the metropolis through associational and literary activities. Karunamoy Bandyopadhyay set up the Temperance Society in Uttarpara as a unit of the Bengal Temperance Society during his time as a student at Presidency College in Calcutta. While the precise statistics of migration to Calcutta for higher education are not available for this period, the annual school inspectors' reports from 1857 to 1865 mention that each year at least five students from the school obtained junior scholarships to study in colleges which, at that time, meant a stint in the leading educational hubs of Calcutta, Serampore or Chinsurah.²⁰

Shifting vernacular schools into the hinterland and facilitating the admission of Brahmins to the English-medium school in Uttarpara together bolstered the social dominance of the *bhadralok*. While non-Brahmin students were not kept out of the English-medium school as a matter of policy, the Uttarpara Hitokary Sabha offered scholarships to children from poor Brahmin families to study in the school (Samanta 1987). By the latter half of the 1850s, vernacular schools were

often not ‘vernacular’ in the strict sense of the term. By 1857, school inspectors reported that schools that were officially vernacular schools often taught English surreptitiously, while Anglo-vernacular schools often went beyond teaching English as a language only and became de facto English-medium schools. Such reports led Gordon Young, the director of public instruction, to express his anxiety about what he called ‘petty English schools’: ‘the class of Aided schools that endeavoured to shape themselves on the model of Government Zillah Schools’ (*Report on Public Instruction* 1858: 13). Young feared that these would disrupt the bilingual educational arrangement and, in turn, cause social disruption by producing more people with aspirations for upward mobility than Calcutta’s economy could accommodate. Historians of nineteenth-century Bengal suggest that these fears did indeed materialise in the metropolis by the 1860s, when a newly educated urban underclass with partial knowledge of English engendered social tensions in Calcutta (Bannerjee 2019). The social satires which mocked the English educated *babu* reflected the thwarted aspirations of this section (Ghosh 2006).

It is unlikely that the Uttarpara *bhadralok*, with their intimate connections in the city, would have been unaware of these links between educational and social trends. The vernacular schools in Hooghly, including those partially funded by Joykrishna Mukherjee, displayed a similar tendency, as noted by the social reformer and educationist Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. On his tour to locate villages suitable for establishing model vernacular schools, he noticed that two of the most populous vernacular schools, known as Joykrishna’s schools, one in Mayapoor and one in Chandrakona, had morphed into ‘petty English schools’.²¹ In brief, the Uttarpara *bhadralok* are likely to have been fully aware of the possible impact of vernacular schools on the social space of Uttarpara. Notably, a section of inhabitants, once again including Joykrishna Mukherjee, successfully blocked a proposal to set up the Ganges Valley Bone Mill – the first modern industrial venture to be set up in Uttarpara – until 1886. While the motivation behind this is debatable, it certainly prevented the growth of an immigrant working-class population which, at that time, could have disturbed the local power equations in what was a physically and demographically small municipality (one and a half square miles with a population of 7,373 in 1911).²²

Conclusion

Thus, starting from the 1840s, Uttarpara underwent a steady transformation, but into what? Vernacular and official documents, published as late as the early twentieth century, often referred to Uttarpara as a space in transition rather

than as a fully formed town. The *Hooghly District Gazetteer* of 1911 referred to it as a 'semi suburban' space, presumably because of the size of its population and its lower level of industrial activity in comparison with its neighbouring municipalities. By 1901, Hooghly district was second only to Howrah in terms of the number of people employed in industries (20.3 per cent of the employed population) (O'Malley and Chakravarti 1912: 176–193). Mills manufacturing jute, cotton and paper flourished in Howrah, Serampore and Bally, while Konnagar had a thriving chemical factory. Uttarpara's urbanisation had not been driven by modern industries. This chapter suggests that education can also be listed as a major driver of urbanisation, though neither the colonial government nor later historians of urbanism have seen it in that light.

Uttarpara's trajectory of transition encourages us to question clear-cut spatial categories and to appreciate the fluidity of spatial practices as well as the historical variations in patterns of urbanisation. Swati Chattopadhyay has usefully suggested that suburbs in colonial India need to be situated in their historical trajectories rather than being seen as extensions of the metropolis (S. Chattopadhyay 2012). Tania Sengupta's research, focusing on the architectural patterns and spatial cultures of the district towns of Bengal, has demonstrated that provincial urbanism in Bengal defied clear-cut categories such as urban, suburban and rural (T. Sengupta 2012). It 'in effect created a "fluid" spatial culture, which was distinct from, but also calibrated between, metropolitan centres on the one hand and a vast rural hinterland on the other' (T. Sengupta 2012: 56). These spaces were shaped by the constantly shifting roles they played with respect to a variety of constituencies and perspectives, and their complex dependence–autonomy relationships with surrounding spaces. These trajectories, Sengupta correctly argues, push us to historically situate categories such as rural, urban, semi-urban and suburban, instead of shoehorning complicated trajectories into them.

Histories of education, while featuring the urban as a site of educational change in the colonial period, have seldom examined the overall spatialisation of colonial education. A close investigation of the operationalisation of education in the nineteenth century reveals that school typologies often overlapped with rural–urban binaries. The rigour and impact of school inspections by the DPI varied according to distance from the metropolis and/or the district towns, while local configurations in village clusters and districts not only determined the local texture of education but also influenced the inspectors' assessment of the nature and pace of educational change. In other words, in the nineteenth century the colonial configuration of mass education, as defined by the Wood's Despatch, the Grants-in-Aid system, the Permanent Settlement and other policies, was reworked

in important ways at local levels.²³ This research on Uttarpara demonstrates how colonial education and the Permanent Settlement together facilitated philanthropy which in turn consolidated the power of the Bengali *bhadralok*. The chapter thus adds to our understanding of education, urbanisation, colonial power and their interconnections.

Notes

1. This couplet has been popular since the nineteenth century. The bouquet refers to the pleasantries exchanged when European officials visited the place. This became a regular feature of Uttarpara once the residential part of the public library was opened in 1859. The library became a venue for banquets and garden parties. The food at these parties was sometimes ordered from the Great Eastern Hotel across the river (Mukhopadhyay 2009).
2. Here is a contemporary map of Kolkata and its vicinity showing some of the west bank municipalities on Google Maps: <https://www.google.com/maps/@22.6725759,88.3235335,14z?hl=en-US&entry=ttu> (accessed 16 August 2024). Uttarpara, Kotrung, Baidyabati, Bhadreshwar, Bally and Howrah can be spotted on the map.
3. *Uttar* means north and *para* means locality.
4. In this chapter, I have mentioned two vernacular categories that are common in the local histories (some of them have been cited in the chapter) and folklore of the place. *Nagarayan* technically refers to urbanisation while *gandagram* refers to an obscure village. Vernacular histories, some of them cited here, often refer to Uttarpara's transition as the steady *nagarayan* of a *gandagram*. This chapter historically situates categories such as 'urban', 'suburban' and 'rural'. The name Uttarpara itself has a spatial connotation (*uttar* means north and *para* means locality). It was a settlement situated in the northern corner of the Bally village.
5. The Permanent Settlement was the contractual agreement between the English East India Company and the landholders of Bengal that fixed land revenues due to the Company in perpetuity. Inspired by the Physiocratic doctrine and agrarian capitalism in England, the Permanent Settlement was expected to catalyse 'improvement' – that is, agrarian capitalism and concomitant civic development had long-term and far-reaching consequences for the economy, the social structure and politics of Bengal under colonial rule (Sarkar 1998).
6. Proceedings of the Uttarpara Municipality, Resolution 12, 1 November 1880 (Mukhopadhyay 2009: 530).

7. *Chowkidari* tax was a watch-and-ward tax for the maintenance of law and order in rural areas and small towns. It began in the medieval period and continued into the British colonial period.
8. *Ekjote* is a traditional form of united action on a public issue at local levels while *dharmaghat* is akin to a modern-day strike.
9. Brahmins are traditional priests and scholars, considered the highest and the ritually 'purest' of all castes within the hierarchical and discriminatory traditional Hindu caste system. The Brahmins entrenched their social and political power in colonial India by promptly taking to colonial education and employment in colonial administration and by exploiting the economic opportunities offered during that period (Sarkar 1998; Subramanian 2019). The Brahmin consolidation in Uttarpara follows this pattern. In Bengal, the Brahmins and other upper castes consolidated their power in the nineteenth century by creating a new socio-cultural group called the *bhadralok* – the new urban middle class with deep networks among their caste affiliated in rural Bengal (T. Bhattacharya 2005).
10. Originally featured in 'Topography of Ooterparah', *Uttarpara Pakshik* (April 1857), 514 (Mukhopadhyay 2009).
11. The Sabarna Brahmins (Sabarna was a particular *gotra*, or a patrilineal lineage or clan in Hindu society, referring to an unbroken line of descent from a common male ancestor, usually one of the seven ancient Hindu saints) owned large tracts of land in what later became Calcutta and spread out in many parts of south Bengal after the East India Company purchased lands in and around Sutanuti and Kalikata. 'Chaital' refers to a particular locality in the north of Bally which was the site for the Chaitali fair and where the local Chattopadhyay families lived.
12. A letter addressed to F. R. Cockrell, magistrate of Hooghly, signed by Joykrishna Mukherjee, Haranath Chatterjee, Bijoy Krishna Mukherjee and others, with a total of hundred signatories, produced in *Uttarpara Pakshik* (1858), 175–178 (Mukhopadhyay 2009: 534).
13. The levy of a 2 per cent education cess on land by the government for investment in vernacular school education was opposed by a section of *zamindars* on two grounds: that the Permanent Settlement made additional levies illegal and that the *zamindars* were already taking up the work of education under the Grants-in-Aid scheme and further state intervention was unnecessary.
14. Funding of schools under the Grants-in-Aid scheme was partly by the state and partly by local patrons. Until 1859, the government paid one-quarter of

- the total cost of the school, which increased to a maximum of half, decided on a case-by-case basis after 1859 (A. Bhattacharya 2021).
15. The Uttarpara school was one of the few aided schools which were officially English-medium, and hence whose curriculum, pedagogy and management structure overlapped with that of *zillah* schools.
 16. Often used by European educators and administrators working in India, 'downward filtration' referred to the gradual transplantation of European knowledge to Indian society through a small but well-trained community of Indians. The phrase is used frequently in reports of the DPI, especially in the years following the Wood's Despatch, when the three-tier school system was being put in place.
 17. Even the smallest financial contributions by local elites towards education were notified in this key journal launched by the DPI, the *Education Gazette*. The journal acted as an interface between the department and society and was an important space of public opinion throughout the nineteenth century.
 18. This marked a change in elite patronage of education. The focus on schools marked a departure from the bygone era of selectively patronising Sanskrit and higher Islamic learning. The school now formed an integral part of the new associational networks and channels of patronage (A. Bhattacharya 2020).
 19. Social historians of nineteenth-century Bengal tend to agree that the Bengali landed upper castes transitioned into government service in the middle of the nineteenth century, in the light of the collapse of agency houses and question marks over the long-term profitability of agriculture under the Permanent Settlement. Sumit Sarkar has demonstrated how these concerns animated the educational projects of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasgar. Sarkar refers to Joykrishna Mukherjee as a key personality within this reformist configuration.
 20. See the general reports on public instruction (1858–1865).
 21. The 'petty English schools' were not a well-defined category but more of an expression of fear and anxiety on the part of the government (A. Bhattacharya 2021).
 22. Sanjaykumar Mukhopadhyay suggests that this may have to do with municipal power politics and was not necessarily a result of concerted action to keep industries out (Mukhopadhyay 2009).
 23. I have explored these themes in my PhD research. See A. Bhattacharya (2020).

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