

Transferring the Capital from Calcutta to New Delhi: Colonial Perceptions on Indian Press Reports During 1911-12

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Calcutta was the economic and cultural capital of British India. Its historic tradition and geographical position enabled it to be the center of British power. In 1911, the British Government decided to shift their capital from Calcutta to New Delhi, and accordingly in 1912, Calcutta ceased to be the capital of British India. This article investigates into the process of this transfer of capital and its impact on Calcutta and the contradictory perceptions centering the issue of transfer.

Keywords: transfer, capital, empire, newspaper, interest.

Calcutta was the seat of the government of Colonial India until 1911 and the commercial capital of the British Indian empire down to the First World War. Once Bengal became the center of English colonialism in the subcontinent, Calcutta and its hinterland rapidly emerged as the nucleus of British economic interests in the country. The prominent position that the city came to enjoy under the Raj was demonstrated by the concentration of industries in its suburbs, the volume of shipping activities carried out through its port and the vast hinterland given over to the production of tea, coal and jute, controlled chiefly by the Scottish managing agency houses.¹ The city also developed as the melting pot of eastern and western cultures. When the Raj sought to impart western education, Calcutta was the experimental site. The new western educated middle class rapidly made Calcutta the cultural capital of the subcontinent.

In the political realm, the early years of the 1910s were of momentous significance. They were marked by the rejoining of East and West Bengal in 1911 and the transfer of capital from Calcutta to New Delhi in 1912. When Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, announced the controversial partition of Bengal in 1905, the bhadralok population of Calcutta spearheaded the Swadeshi Movement and other segments of the city joined; in 1911, the goal of the movement was realized when the British government announced the annulment of Bengal's division. The year 1912, as Suranjan Das has pointed out, again altered the balance of Bengali bhadralok morale. The transfer of capital from Calcutta to Delhi indicated the British determination to evade future challenges to its authority.² In 1911, the Emperor George V announced the government's decision at the Delhi Durbar to move the capital from Calcutta to Delhi. Although the move to Delhi was to take the wind out of the sails of anti-colonial Bengali politics, there was little doubt that Calcutta's status was much

reduced by this move. This seemed to be the temper of the king's conciliatory speech at Calcutta :

“The changes in the administration of India, resulting from the announcement made by me at the great Durbar at Delhi, will affect to a certain extent Calcutta. But your city must always remain the premier city of India. It's population, it's importance as a commercial center and great emporium of trade, it's splendid historic traditions - all combine to invest Calcutta with a unique character, which should preserve to it a pre- eminent position.”³

As Suranjan Das remarked, the transfer of the capital in 1912 dried up major sources of government jobs and patronage, causing erosion of the bhadraloks' role in colonial administration. Simultaneously, this altered situation unfolded at a time of general stagnation of bhadralok economic entrepreneurship⁴. To Rajat kanta Ray, although Calcutta continued to be the governing center of the British empire in India until 1912, even after the transfer, Calcutta remained the nerve center of the economic connection between Britain and India. While explaining the transfer's impact on Calcutta, Ray noted that Bengal's reaction to the “package deal” of 1912 was somewhat mixed. Some of the Calcutta notables , who were large urban property owners in the metropolis, and those dependent on the service of the government , regarded the transfer of the capital and the consequent decline of the land revenue and loss of employment as too large a price to pay for the annulment of partition of Bengal. There was also a feeling that nationalist organizations based in Calcutta, especially the Bengal Congress, would loss much of their weight in all India affairs as a result of the shift. Calcutta Municipal politics, in which the leaders of the Bengal Congress, had first made their mark, had been invested with countrywide importance in consequence of the fact that the city was the seat of government of India till 1912. Despite the obvious change in the city's status, Ray remarks that too much importance could not be attached to the impact of the transfer on the politics of Calcutta and Bengal. Calcutta was still vital to the wider imperial interests of British rule in India .After it ceased to be the governing center of the Indian empire, it remained the focus of concentration for British economic interests. Of the joint stock European rupee capital employed in India in 1914, more than 80% was invested in Calcutta. Even after 1912, therefore, Calcutta's municipal politics continued to have a ‘supra-local importance’. Since the stakes were high, a fierce battle went on for control of the city affairs.⁵

The decision to transfer the capital and abandon Calcutta was taken hurriedly. In a letter to the Earl of Crewe, Secretary of State for India, sent from Simla to London on 25th August, 1911, Lord Hardinge , the Viceroy of India pointed out that it has long been recognized to be a ‘ serious anomaly ‘that the British governed India from Calcutta, located at the eastern extremity of its Indian territory. He then turned to the more pressing reasons to move away from Calcutta, which for 150 years had served as the British capital in India. The India Council's Act of 1909, a legislation passed by Britain's parliament known as the Morley-Minto reforms , had allowed Indians to stand for legislative council position for the

first time. For years, the British had ruled from Calcutta, the commercial hub of India, which the East India Company, in the 18th century, had developed into a colonial city. Hardinge argued that the rising importance of the elected legislative bodies meant that Britain needed to find a more centrally located capital.⁶ But Hardinge's subsequent point to Crewe explains that why the British were in such a rush to get out of Calcutta. The viceroy alluded to the burgeoning opposition to the British rule in Calcutta, that was making it less than a hospitable home. Britain had faced a rising tide of calls to extend a measure of self-rule to India since the last 19th century. That movement became the most violent in Calcutta, the commercial and the literary nucleus of the country. In 1905, the British had partitioned Bengal, a massive and powerful province cantered on Calcutta into two portions as an attempt to weaken this opposition to their rule. The decision only inflamed the nationalist sentiment, leading to a call for a boycott of British goods and, eventually, bombings and political assassinations in the city streets.

The plan of transfer, which the king George announced at the Imperial Durbar, a gathering of Indian princes in Delhi, was a closely guarded secret before it was formally unveiled. It was acclaimed by those in Delhi but met with hostility from many other quarters, especially in Calcutta. The old city of Delhi which had been the capital of Mughal India, was selected to accommodate the British. Probably Hardinge had championed Delhi for its geographical position as the centre of north India; the aim of colonial rulers was to shift to a planned new city adjacent to the old one but fulfilling the needs of an imperial administrative apparatus.

Lord Curzon, who had taken the decision to partition Bengal criticized the decision of the transfer of capital. In Curzon's view, Delhi was located far from other important centers of British India, including Madras and Rangoon. He pointed out that the Mughals, long resident in Agra, had only made Delhi the capital in the expiring years of their regime. Curzon, in his vice-regal position, had seen Delhi as a place to confer honors to India's princes. In 1903, he had organized an extravagant durbar in Delhi. But Curzon and other imperialists, had also tried to build up an independent imperial heritage and tradition of the British empire. That was why Curzon ordered the building of an imposing memorial to the late Queen Victoria in Calcutta, a city which the British had built into a colonial metropolis. In the end the Victoria Memorial was inaugurated in 1921, a decade after Calcutta had ceased to be the capital of British India.⁷ British colonial capitalists, largely located in Calcutta were also furious over the secrecy with which the transfer was made. The commercial classes viewed with apprehension, the removal of the government from all contact with mercantile and manufacturing interests. However, records show that their grievances were mitigated in the subsequent years, especially those of the First World War, when super profits piled up.

Thus the years 1911 and 1912 witnessed an unprecedented event in the history of the city of Calcutta, for which it was not at all prepared. The British Government in India in 1911 decided to shift the nucleus of their power from Calcutta to Delhi and accordingly in 1912, the capital was transferred. This transfer of capital, as Suranjan Das pointed out,

indicated the British determination to evade future challenges to its authority. But how was this transfer of capital taken by the greater populace of Calcutta? What was the response of the local press to the scheme of transfer? All these questions form the theme of this article.

The Indian and Local Press and the Transfer of the Capital

The Nayak (15th December, 1911) welcomed the shift from Calcutta to Delhi. But it requested the Governor General to reside in Calcutta for at least two months every winter. The paper did not believe that the removal of the capital would do any harm to Calcutta. In Nayak's voice we thus see a loyalist overtone as it supported the British decision on the transfer of capital.⁸

A moderate opinion was held by the Beharee (15th December, 1911). In commenting on the transfer of the capital of India from Calcutta to Delhi, the Beharee was quite aware that there would be considerable difference of opinion. It cautiously held that the step in the long run would not prove so menacing as it then did. In the opinion of this paper, the trade, commerce and industries could not suffer to any great extent. As the capital of a great presidency and a great sea port the paper predicted that Calcutta would continue to be the second town in India in matters of trade and commerce. The Beharee thus consoled the citizens of Calcutta, that Calcutta would persist in retaining its importance even after the loss of its position as the capital city of the empire.⁹

The Comrade (16th December, 1911)¹⁰ stated that the imperial announcement related to the transfer of the seat of the Indian Government from Calcutta to Delhi had created a sensation throughout the country. The correspondence between the Indian Government and the Secretary of State regarding the matter had begun in August, but so strict had been the secrecy maintained that probably not more than a dozen persons knew about the change before it was announced. Excepting in Bengal where it touched certain vested interests too closely, the transfer of the government seat to Delhi was received with considerable satisfaction in every other part of the country. Calcutta had made it possible for the Bengalees to loom beyond all proportions in all India affairs, and it was no fault of the Indian Government if it viewed public questions affecting the whole of the country sometimes in a false perspective and consequently blundered. In Delhi while perpetuating a great Imperial tradition and by finding an appropriate capital for a great empire, the government would find a necessary detachment for the Imperial conduct of the imperial affairs.

The Prasun (22nd December, 1911)¹¹ was happy to hear that Delhi was to be the capital of India. In its opinion, the fact of Calcutta being the metropolis was a thing for Bengal to glory in. But it did not mean that the interests of Bengal alone was to be considered in a matter like this. The Prasun also reported that the Anglo Indian Press of Calcutta was most unhappy at this change and was apprehensive to the loss of trade. But such fears, appeared to Prasun to be groundless, judging from the commercial prosperity of Karachi and Bombay.

Thus the Indian press, or at least sections of the press which were concerned with

the matter, did not seem to be overly worried about the consequences of the transfer. They did not raise a hue and cry that was expected of them in this context. Instead they criticized the European press since they opposed this transfer. The *Jasohar* (16th December, 1911)¹² labeled the Anglo Indian press as hypocrites who were bothered about the transfer of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi only because the interests of the Anglo Indian shopkeepers were most likely to suffer by this scheme of transfer. The *Sulabh Samachar* (22nd December, 1911)¹³ also held similar views.

The objection of the European press was shared by those segments of the local press in Bengal which believed that the public sphere of the city would lose its wider significance and influence as a result of the transfer. They feared that the colonized intelligentsia, first formed in Bengal would lose not only its importance but also its livelihood. The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (26th December, 1911)¹⁴ marked a departure from many of its contemporaries. In its opinion Bengal was about to lose its prestige by the transfer of the Imperial seat of the Government, after the lapse of 150 years, to a city which was very far from it. The paper feared that the measure would not only affect the political status of the whole Bengali nation but also challenge the livelihoods of tens of thousands of Bengalees belonging to the *bhadralok* class. The *Hindu Patriot* (15th December, 1911)¹⁵ also belonged to the same group of exceptional newspapers who feared that with the transfer of capital, the worst would befall the city and the region. The paper claimed that the removal of the capital of India to Delhi from Calcutta was a serious blow to the prestige of Bengal and the question was one which was very delicate and difficult to tackle. It remarked that the opinion in Bengal was very strong against it. The *Hindu Patriot* anticipated a possible degradation of Calcutta. The *Indian Mirror* (16th December, 1911)¹⁶ questioned why the seat of the Government of India was being removed to Delhi. It wondered : “ why Calcutta and its suburbs with Barrackpore and Howrah could not be retained as the seat of Government of India?” The paper remarked that Calcutta was a British made capital and it could not be abandoned in favor of Delhi. The paper recommended that Dacca could have been a better place for the Governor of Bengal to reside in. Thus the *Indian Mirror* while discouraging the proposal of capital transfer from Calcutta to Delhi, offered certain prescriptions for and criticized the British Government of India.

The *Muhammadi* (5th January, 1912)¹⁷ was the only paper to mention the impact on the impoverished Calcuttans when it said, even if in a sectional tone, that the removal of headquarters from Calcutta would cause immense loss to the poor Muslims who were stationed at Calcutta and were employed in the city as tailors, pressmen, compositors, duftrees, petty clerks, draftsmen, khansamas, baburchis, syces, coachmen, masons, carpenters and so forth. The local Muslim press thus seemed to be concerned with the transfer, like sections of the Hindu *bhadralok* press, on issues related to livelihoods. They therefore differed with the interests being put forward from North India by the Urdu press, such as the *Comrade*.

The Local European Press

The European press in Calcutta was up in arms against the change when it was first announced. The non official white community in the city was a class very powerful and their press was always ready to express and uphold their social interests. However, once the decision loomed on them as irrevocable and they realized their interests would remain unhampered, their tone, though not too enthusiastic, changed. Although they opposed the transfer proposal at the initial stage, they later came to realize that their economic base and political influence over the eastern region of India will remain unhampered.

From 1912, they were singing a different tune. In the New Year, the Capital (4 January, 1912),¹⁸ as the mouth piece of colonial capital, observed after the transfer had taken place that the shift of capital from Calcutta to Delhi would not affect Calcutta too much. The aim of this removal was to concentrate power and decision in the person of the viceroy and to relieve him from interminable absorption in secretariat details. The Capital opined that the removal of the vice-regal court from Calcutta, did not mean decline of local trade but it meant opening up of Delhi as another market. It would also lead to a reduction of house and land values in Calcutta. The Statesman (11 January, 1912)¹⁹ on the other hand noted that the transfer of government capital from Calcutta to Delhi had already been taken very seriously by certain Calcutta papers and this was only natural. It remarked that if it was a delight for Delhi which was to be made the capital, in the same way, it was a disappointment for Calcutta to lose that position. But the paper admitted that no one, well acquainted with the work of Government of India and of the Government of Bengal, could fail to recognize the wisdom of removing the seat of the former government from Calcutta and leaving the Government of Bengal do its work, as every other local government did. To the paper it seemed quite ridiculous to suppose that commerce in Calcutta was to be in any way affected by the change especially as there was to be a Governor in the city, upholding local and personal interests ; it begged for a show of 'loyalty' and 'calm'.

Thus the issue of transfer did not raise extreme discontent among different segments of the press. The issue opened up certain political, economic, regional and parochial concerns but did not become a source of burning dispute and controversy. Bhavatosh Dutta has observed that the annulment of the partition in 1911 preoccupied the Bengalis so much that they did not pay much heed to the transfer of capital.²⁰ This was certainly true for the Bengali bhadralok press. The 'settled fact of partition' when became 'unsettled'; the colonial Hindu Bengali intelligentsia was so overjoyed with this fact that the transfer of capital from Calcutta did not attract much attention from the Calcutta populace and in the Calcutta press.

Thus, the transfer of capital from Calcutta to Delhi was a preplanned proposal of the British Government but to the influential sections of the local population, from Europeans to members of the Indian intelligentsia, it came as a 'bolt from the blue'. Loyalist opinions supporting the move existed in and outside Bengal but voices of outrage could be heard also. But the European and local Indian antipathy to the proposal of the transfer of capital

from Calcutta to Delhi showed a downward graph. Except for a few articles in the native newspapers, no major protest was seen against this step. Nowhere did the British government face the kind of opposition that was seen during the anti-partition movement, in 1905-06 and its aftermath. The overexcitement which preoccupied the bhadralok intelligentsia at the annulment of partition in 1911, alongside continued economic significance of the city which mattered to all sections of urban society, made the transfer of capital a relatively less noticed event.

Endnotes:

1. A.K.Bagchi: 'Wealth and Work in Calcutta, 1860-1921', in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed.), *Calcutta the Living City*, Vol 1, Calcutta, O.U.P,1995, p.212.
2. Suranjan Das: 'The Politics of Agitation:1912-1947', in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed.), *Calcutta the Living City*, Vol1, Calcutta, O.U.P,1995, 15.
3. Partho Datta: *Planning the City : Urbanization and reform in Calcutta, C.1800-C.1940*, New Delhi, Tulika Books, 2012, p. 201.
4. Suranjan Das: op. cit., in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed.),op.cit., p.16
5. Rajat Kanta Ray: *Urban roots of Indian nationalism: Pressure Groups and Conflicts of Interests in Calcutta City Politics, 1875-1939*, Calcutta, Vikas, 1979, pp. 63-67.
6. *The Comrade*, 16 December, 1911, *Report on Native Press*.
7. Ibid.
8. *The Nayak*, 15 December, 1911, *Report on Native Press*.
9. *The Beharee*, 15 December,1911, *Report on Native Press*.
10. *The Comrade*, 16 December, 1911, *Report on Native Press*.
11. *The Prasun*, 22 December,1911, *Report on Native Press*.
12. *The Jasohar*, 16 December,1911, *Report on Native Press*.
13. *The Sulabh Samachar*, 22 December,1911, *Report on Native Press*.
14. *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 26 December, 1911,*Report on Native Press*.
15. *The Hindu Patriot*, 15 December,1911, *Report on Native Press*.
16. *The Indian Mirror*, 16 December, 1911, *Report on Native Press*.
17. *The Muhammadi*, 5 January,1912, *Report on Native Press*.
18. *The Capital*, 4 January, 1912, Vol. 47.
19. *The Statesman*, 11 January, 1912.
20. Bhavatosh Dutta: *Saat Satero*, Calcutta, Mitra and Ghosh, 1991, p. 57.