

# The development of Asansol as a municipal city with Anglo-Indian touch: A historical analysis (1863-1896)

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## Abstract

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Although Asansol is considered as a rapid financially growing city in India but before the expansion of railways it was a mere village in the truest sense of the term. The East India Railway Company bought a large forest land at Shargar from the Panchakot Raj for constructing a Railway Zone of the East India Railway. The Company extended the railway track up to Asansol in the month of July 1863. From this period Asansol became an important railway hub for the company and later it also became a junction for the Bengal Nagpur Railway. Europeans and people of Anglo-Indian community settled in Asansol mainly as railway employees. Anglo-Indian community is considered as a mixed race between Indian mother and European father. In spite of having a European culture they also adopted various aspects of Indian culture. During this time Anglo-Indian Schools also started to function in full swing. This era also witnessed a filthy Asansol and lack of proper hygiene. Public health infrastructure was in a deplorable condition. Assensole (now Asansol) municipality was set up on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1885 with the tacit support of The East India Railway. But in 1886 due to some special reasons the Municipal Act was withdrawn from Asansol. Finally the Municipal act was re implemented in 1896. The Anglo-Indians played a vital role in establishment of a structured municipality in Asansol. The aim of my paper is to focus on the role of the Anglo-Indian community in the formation of Asansol municipality.

**Keywords:** Asansol, Anglo-Indian, Railway, Municipality

## Introduction

The landscape of colonial Asansol was largely shaped by the Anglo-Indian and European community. The colonial administration nurtured the evolution of Asansol as a thriving industrial city of South-West Bengal. Anglo-Indians

emerged as a distinctive population in this region. They were instrumental in the urban development of this industrial and coal hub of colonial Bengal. There is no denial of the fact that the coming of the railways played an important role in the development of the municipality in Asansol. In this regard the contribution of the Anglo-Indians needs special attention. Apart from the Anglo-Indians, the Europeans and the natives also played a significant role in the development of the basic infrastructure of the city. Before the expansion of the railways coal was considered as the major factor for the development of Asansol.

From the very inception of the railways in Bengal the Anglo-Indians played a remarkable role. They settled themselves in the railway towns built largely with their own initiative. The railway institutes which flowered in these newly built cities were their cultural hubs, where they used to nurture their culture Asansol was no exception.<sup>1</sup> The major development of Asansol took off after the expansion of the East Indian railway in 1863. According to local commentary of 1774, Suetonous Heatly and Jon Sumner, employees of British East India Company explored the coalfield area surrounding Asansol and Raniganj. In 1855 the East India Company extended railways up to Raniganj for the transportation of coal at minimal cost. The overall development of Raniganj was initiated for better quality coal production and the communication system. By this time the East India Railway Company decided to establish a railway zone in Raniganj to provide better quality of railway service. For speeding up the process, the Company wanted to get hold of the same land in Raniganj for which the Zamindar of Searsol was approached. The Zaminder however denied the proposal, because he was concerned about spreading of germs and diseases from the railway coal engine and its smoke.<sup>2</sup>

In the next stage, the East-India Railway Company approached on a positive note. A vast forest land at Shargar was handed over to the company. In July 1863 the Railway Company extended the railway track up to Asansol. The town of Asansol became a railway hub which was later transformed into a junction for the Bengal Nagpur Railway.<sup>3</sup> Thanks to the expansion of the railways that the Anglo-Indian community settled in this railway hub as it provided major source of employment for this community. Asansol thus became a major European and

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<sup>1</sup> S. Muthiah and Harry MacLure: *The Anglo-Indians A500-year History*. (New Delhi, Niyogi books, 2017),78.

<sup>2</sup> Bidisha Chakrabrotty, 'Asansol: Ak Rail Shaharer Itikhata', In Sekhar Bhowmick, ed., *Banglar Shahar : Ouponibashik Parbo*, (Kolkata, Ashadip Publisher, 2015.) 90-91.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Eurasian (Anglo-Indian) station.<sup>4</sup> Both the communities accommodated themselves in the local administrative infrastructure for catering their own needs.

### **Anglo-Indians and the development of Asansol**

Primarily Asansol was a village inhabited by the natives. It lacked modern infrastructure and proper public health system. Anglo-Indians were a mixed race and they formed a heterogeneous race between European and the native Indians. They were also known by various other names like Anglo-Celtics, Eurasians, Luso-Indians, Half cast, Indo-Briton, East Indian etc. The mixed Anglo-Indian communities were fond of European culture and their mother tongue was English and religiously they were Christian. Thus the town associated with railways became a hub for the Anglo-Indian community.<sup>5</sup> They also established a railway colony in Asansol, where many Anglo-Indians settled for generations. About seventy percent of the Asansol Anglo-Indian depended on railway sector for their livelihood.<sup>6</sup> The new settlement of Asansol faced numerous challenges, like need of good school for their future generations, improved public health and other basic infrastructure for healthy living. In terms of education they preferred English medium school. For the new settlement institutional demand became the need of the day. The Railway Company took the initiative but only Railway school was not sufficient. From this point of time, English medium Anglo-Indian schools (formally European Schools) were initiated in Asansol for catering the needs of Europeans and the Anglo-Indian students. The Loreto Convent School started its journey as a branch school on February 1877 with 35 students. This School took off as a branch school by the Sisters of Loreto, which operated in the same way as its mother institution in Calcutta.<sup>7</sup> St. Patrick's School is another important Anglo-Indian institution which was built by the Belgian Jesuits in 1877.<sup>8</sup> Thus these educational institutions became harbingers of modernity in Asansol. As a result, Asansol was eventually transforming from a rural hub to an urban one with modern facilities. The railway company tried its best for maintaining modern standard service. Since a considerable number of Anglo-Indian families permanently settled there, they became interested in the

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<sup>4</sup> General department, Education Branch, July 1877, File no.22, Proceeding 44, Directorate of State Archive, Kolkata, India.

<sup>5</sup> R. Dean Wright, *The Shattering of culture identity: The Anglo-Indian Community in rural India*, International Journal of Anglo-Indian Studies, 2, 1 (1997), 47.

<sup>6</sup> Appointment department, April 1926, File no.4C-39, Proceeding 17, Directorate of State Archive, Kolkata, India.

<sup>7</sup> General Department, Education Branch, 9 May 1877, File-22, No. 42, Directorate of State Archive, Kolkata, India.

<sup>8</sup> Subhasis Ghosh, *"The Anglo-Indian in Asansol: A socio cultural narrative (1863-1947)"*, unpublished M.Phil. Dissertation, Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol, 2019.

development of a proper municipal system, which was required for them to sustain a healthy living.

### **Municipality became the need of the hour**

With the coming of the railways and the Anglo-Indians the need of a proper urban infrastructure in Asansol became the need of the hour. A local body was required for up gradation of the basic domestic infrastructure. It also became essential for the development of the region and to maintain a healthy living. Since the Anglo-Indian settled in this locality, they tried their best for beginning in a local municipal body which will effectively cater their basic needs. Since the Europeans were well acquainted with the system of modern urban infrastructure, they were very much eager for implementing those in this newly formed railway hub.<sup>9</sup> The Anglo-Indians too were anxious for bringing in a proper system required for their settlement. The residential area was tidy but the adjacent market area was over crowded and unhygienic.<sup>10</sup> It was impossible for them to maintain a proper living without the proper changes in the market ambiance. Therefore the adaption of municipal law was extremely important.

Immediately after the expansion of railways a municipality was essential for the maintenance of public health as well as the law and order in Asansol. Thefts and burglaries were frequent in the European and Anglo-Indian quarter of Asansol. The bazar of this area was full of unruly elements. Moreover there was lack of adequate police force to maintain law and order. At that point of time number of the European and Eurasian establishments were 45 with a population of 500.<sup>11</sup> Thus safety was the priority for the administration.

As far as public health was concerned, in 1884 there were no public latrines in Asansol.<sup>12</sup> The Joint Magistrate of Raniganj pointed out the reasons behind the necessity of public latrines. He insisted about the establishment of a municipality in Asansol for providing the residents with basic civic amenities. He also mentioned that, the railway company provided a number of good roads, trees had also been planted in abundance and the company also improved the water supply of the locality.<sup>13</sup> These facilities were provided not only for the company's servant but also for the general residents of Asansol. The company's servants

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<sup>9</sup> Wright, Dean and Susan W. Wright: "*The Anglo-Indian Community in Contemporary India.*" (Midwest Quarterly, Vol.XII, 1971), 178.

<sup>10</sup> Municipal Department, Municipal Branch, July 1887, File no. -13, No-57, Directorate of State Archive, Kolkata, India.

<sup>11</sup> General Department, Education Branch, 9 May 1877, File-22, No. 42, Directorate of State Archive, Kolkata, India.

<sup>12</sup> Municipal Department, Municipal Branch, November 1884, File no.-17, Proceeding 65-68. Directorate of State Archive, Kolkata, India.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

were initially reluctant about this because they feared that with the coming of the municipality they will be burdened with the extra tax which was till then not imposed on them as they were a part of the company's family.<sup>14</sup> The necessity of passing a municipal statute in Asansol was therefore made necessary by the aforementioned factors as well as the demands of the Anglo-Indian Community. As a result the first proposal of municipal law in Asansol came into vogue in 1884.

### **Proposal of the Municipality**

The proposal intended to promote the creation of the Asansol Municipality in response to the changing requirements and goals of the active Asansol community. In order to handle the various problems of Asansol, a vibrant and expanding city required a specific municipal governing framework. T. English Magistrate of Raniganj affirmed that those living in Asansol depending on railway would be very happy to hear the news of the enactment of the municipal act.<sup>15</sup> H. Fasson magistrate of the Burdwan division sent a proposal letter on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1884 to the commissioner of the Burdwan division and proposed to introduce the Bengal Municipal Act in Asansol. Accordingly he also furnish here with the information necessary for the publication of the notification prescribed in section 8 of Act III (B.C) of 1884. He proposed the area of the Asansol municipality was to be 2.25 square miles along with a population of 4,356. Among them more than three fourth of the adult male population were engaged in non-agricultural pursuits.<sup>16</sup> The requirement for the development of the municipality in a particular area was the fulfillment of basic criteria which has was formulated in the Calcutta Gazette municipality act. Considering the increasing population and area of Asansol, it fulfilled all the technical requirements of a municipality and thus it was considered as a popper place for the development of municipality organization.<sup>17</sup> After that H. Farrer joint magistrate of Raniganj submitted a list (Table-1) of the villages with populations which were included in the Asansol Municipality he also mentioned about the Entire boundary of the Municipality (table-2).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Municipal Department, Municipal Branch, May 1885, File no.-4, Proceeding –B-37, Directorate of State Archive, Kolkata, India.

<sup>16</sup> Municipal Department, Municipal Branch, November 1884, File no.-17, Proceeding 65-68. Directorate of State Archive, Kolkata, India.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

**Table-1**

<b>Assensole Municipality</b>			
<b>Sl. No.</b>	<b>Name of Villages</b>	<b>Number of houses in the Villages</b>	<b>Population</b>
1	Rail par	182	860
2	English quarter	45	500
3	Budhadanga village	278	1278
4	Mr.Bastin's bazaar	105	418
5	Pacca bazaar	34	148
6	Munshi bazer	120	582
7	Talpukur chati	146	570
Total			

[Source: Municipal Department, Municipal Branch, November 1884, File no.-17, proceeding 65-68. Directorate of State Archive, Kolkata, India.]

**Table-2**

<b>Entire boundary of the Municipality</b>	
On the north	The Amra Kundajor and lands of Assensole mouzah called kalna Bata, chawkababar Math.
On the east	Road leading to old railway station of Assensole.
On the south	Budha and Assensole villages.
On the west	Lands of Budha Mozah called Baromesha.

[Source: Source: Municipal Department, Municipal Branch, November 1884, File no.-17, proceeding 65-68. Directorate of State Archive, Kolkata, India.]

### **Establishment of Asansol Municipality and its crisis**

Under Secretary, Municipal Department of Government of Bengal E.N. Baker sent a letter to the Commissioner of Burdwan Division to enforce the Municipal Act in Asansol with effect from 1st July 1885. In that letter he directed that no objection should be raised to the measure taken for the formation of this municipality. In the absence of any objection, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal was pleased to announce the inclusion of the Mohallas situated in the town of Asansol under Section 8, Act III of 1884 (B.C). The letter also stated that the Asansol Municipality comprising these included Mohallas would come into force from 1st July 1885. It was also notified that a copy of the notification required for

the formation of this municipality shall be published in the Calcutta Gazette. He requested the submission of names of gentlemen for appointment to the Municipal Board, specifying the qualifications and occupations of each. It was also mentioned that, two alternative names should be submitted for each appointment so that the government have the choice to select one.<sup>19</sup> The government of the Bengal municipal department announced in the Calcutta Gazette of 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1885 that the Municipal Act will be implemented in Asansol on July 1<sup>st</sup> of the same year.<sup>20</sup> Ten commissioners were to be nominated to the municipal board. Asansol municipality thus started functioning from 1<sup>st</sup> July of 1885.

The journey of the newly established municipality of the railway town of Asansol was not at all a smooth phenomenon. Since its implementation, it has encountered a number of difficulties. Particularly at that time, circumstances led to a discussion concerning the potential repeal of the Municipal Act in Asansol. In this context on 19<sup>th</sup> April 1886, W. Teunon, Mr. Clarke, Mr. Arbuthnott, Revd. Father Clippelier, Mr. Ballenden, Baboo Shew Charan Lal, Mr. Beyts, Munshi Akbar Khalifa attended a meeting for repealing of the Municipal Act of Asansol.<sup>21</sup> In this meeting various issues were discussed and they highlighted the reasons for revoking the Municipal Act of Asansol. The reasons which arose in this discussion were- (1)Railway authorities were opposing the Municipal Act; (2)The Commission and individuals were opposing the Municipal Act; (3)They were also unanimously opposed by local communities; (4)The town was a railway town but the market was situated outside; (5)Absence of competent persons to administer the law and order; (6)Absence of a person qualified for the post of commissioner; (7)the income of the municipality was much restricted and thus it was difficult for them to make arrangements for the maintenance of proper sanitation in the entire municipality. However the sanitary measures maintained by the Railway authorities so far have been found satisfactory.<sup>22</sup> On 20<sup>th</sup> May 1886 T. E. Coxhead, Magistrate of Burdwan sent a letter to The Commissioner of the Burdwan Division regarding the resolution passed at the meeting of the Municipal Commissioners of Asansol. The objective of the meeting was to discuss the reason for proposing the abolition of the municipality. Mr. Tomyns Browne and Mr. Drysdale were in favour of this institution and Mr. Arbuthnott and Mr. Beyts were opposed to its continuance. It was impossible to constitute

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<sup>19</sup> Municipal Department, Municipal Branch, May 1885, File no.-4, Proceeding –B-38, Directorate of State Archive, Kolkata, India.

<sup>20</sup> Municipal Department, Municipal Branch, May 1885, File no.-4, Proceeding –B-39, Directorate of State Archive, Kolkata, India.

<sup>21</sup> Municipal Department, Municipal Branch, December 1886, File no.-9, Proceeding – B-99-100, Directorate of State Archive, Kolkata, India.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

body of Commission outside the officials.<sup>23</sup> Thus it is clear that the early days of the formation of Asansol Municipality was not at all easy.

### **The Railways became reluctant about the responsibility of the municipality**

After the establishment of the municipality of Asansol the Railway authorities showed their reluctance in maintaining the newly establish municipality. They were not interested in shouldering the responsibility of such a vast portion of municipality. Colman Macaulay, Secretary of the Government of Bengal, sent a letter to the Secretary of the Government of India regarding the role of the East Indian Railway on Municipality at Asansol. The Magistrate of Burdwan described the condition of the native portion of the town as follows: - "*The condition of the bazar, which line the Grand Trunk Road, is particularly foul, while the quarter known as Railpar is notorious for outbreak of cholera.*"<sup>24</sup> The sub-divisional officer of Ranigunge reported the objection to be valid and mentioned that, "*I believe the introduction of the Act will be welcome to the Railway people, as many who have lived in towns where the Act is in force have asked me why it had not been introduced here. I am sure that had the Act been in force last year, the severe outbreak of cholera would never have reached such proportions.*"<sup>25</sup> After the establishment of Asansol municipality the commissioners did significant changes of the Asansol in various fields. The key persons of the Asansol municipality were railway officials. The bazar of the railway town of Asansol was extremely dependent on the railway. The important officials of the railway authorities were opposed to Asansol municipality Act. The Commissioner Sir Rivers Thompson remarked that if the provisions of the Municipal Act were withdrawn from Asansol, it could only be on the condition that the Railway Company should bear the cost of what was necessary to secure the cleanliness, not only of the European quarter of the town, but also of the bazar.<sup>26</sup> On this subject the railway department agent replied that, there was no reason why the Railway Company should undertake the conservancy of the bazar, or of any portion of the town outside the limits of the Railway property.<sup>27</sup>

Asansol town was undoubtedly a part of the traffic system of the East Indian Railway. Being a developing town, municipal regulations were required both to promote the health of the town and be disseminated through their agencies. In these matters ideally the solidarity of interests between the Railway and the town must be recognized. It can no more be allowed that the Railway, having made its own conservancy arrangements, can claim exemption from Municipal regulations

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Municipal Department, Municipal Branch, July 1887, File no. - 13, No-57, Directorate of State Archive, Kolkata, India.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



and taxes. The Lieutenant-Governor was hopeful about maintaining a mutual co-existence among the railway and the municipal authorities. But if the railway authorities maintained a very stubborn attitude, it will be difficult to carry on with smooth running of local administration by the local bodies.<sup>28</sup>

### **Abolition and re-establishment of the municipality**

There is no denial of the fact that there existed an intimate relationship between the municipality and railway authorities as far as Asansol was concerned. Thus, it is evident that the railways were responsible for the enactment of Municipal Act, which was later repealed when the railways declined to accept accountability. On 7<sup>th</sup> September 1887, the Secretary of the Government of India A. P. MacDonnell in a letter to the Secretary of the Government of Bengal, Municipal department mentioned that any decision regarding the Asansol city is to be taken in consultation with the railway authorities. Thus he mentioned that, “.....*the quarters occupied by the railway are kept in good sanitary condition, and that the company are not concerned in seeing that cleanness is observed in the bazar or any portion of the town outside the limits of their premises.*”<sup>29</sup> The railway authorities were of the opinion that they were autonomous in spirit and they were least interested in coming within the preview of the municipal authorities but the government was not at all interested in making this an issue. They were of the opinion that the way Asansol was developing rapidly it may develop without the support of the railway authorities. Moreover the government also tried to establish the fact that the areas controlled by the railway authority came within the jurisdiction of the municipality. The excuse used by the Railway Company to disclaim all liability in this regard is that the quarters occupied by the company are kept in a good sanitary condition and they are not concerned with the cleanliness of the market or any other part of the city. The Government of India was of the view that the Railways cannot avoid the liability of the area under its jurisdiction by virtue of holding its property. Even in their own interests the railway authorities cannot deny all the responsibility of market sanitation. Nor could they expect the Government to form a separate municipality for the market and raise the taxes necessary to preserve it from the destitute people living there.<sup>30</sup> As a result it was difficult to continue the Municipal Act in Asansol. Thus the Municipal Act was forced to be revoked even after it was passed in 1885.

The blame game between the municipal authority and its railway counterpart added fuel to the atmosphere of suppressed tension which prevailed over the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Municipal Department, Municipal Branch, December 1887, File no.-13, No-77. Directorate of State Archive, Kolkata, India.

<sup>30</sup> Municipal Department, Municipal Branch, October 1896, File no-1-M/3-1, proceeding -1-2, Directorate of State Archive, Kolkata, India.

entire Asansol municipality. Finally the tension was relieved a bit and as a result of this a notice was issued by the governor on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1896.<sup>31</sup> In the notice it was mentioned that if the notice does not receive any objection within six months from any person then the municipality would take the final shape from 1<sup>st</sup> July 1896. Whatever may be the case the final notification was published on 7<sup>th</sup> September 1896 and the recognition of Asansol as a municipality can be dated from 1<sup>st</sup> October 1896. After its formation in the initial stage the municipal committee comprised of five members from European or Anglo- Indian community.<sup>32</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In fine it can be argued that Asansol developed as a municipal town of the European model. From its inception Asansol was considered as a city of Europeans as well as the Anglo-Indian community and nobody can deny the fact that their role was pioneering in the development of the railway town. It was the initiatives of these communities which helped in the grooming and shaping of the newly formed Asansol municipality. Anglo-Indians played a significant role in the development of Asansol Municipality which was perhaps much more important than the European involvement. It is a fact that though the Europeans came to Asansol mostly for their occupation they were not interested of permanent residentship. On the other hand the Anglo-Indians were finically weaker than the Europeans. So they started to settle permanently in Asansol for the sake of their occupation and subsistence. Thus the Anglo-Indians had their own responsibility in the development of the railway hub in the Bengal presidency. Eventually they also developed a composite culture in this railway town which acquired a unique identity in the near future.

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<sup>31</sup> Municipal Department, Municipal Branch, September 1896, File no.-M/1-M/3-11, proceeding 4-19. Directorate of State Archive, Kolkata, India.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.