

# Between Empire And Enclave: French Chandannagore In The Shadow Of British Calcutta

Swagatam Khan  
Independent Scholar  
Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India

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## **Abstract:**

*This article re-examines the rise and decline of Chandannagore, the principal French settlement in Bengal, in relation to the ascent of Kolkata (Calcutta). While scholarship has traditionally foregrounded British expansion, this study restores Chandannagore to the center of early modern Bengal's contested colonial landscape. It argues that the French settlement represented a viable alternative model of European commercial urbanism, characterized by negotiated integration into Mughal trade networks, reliance on indigenous merchant intermediaries, and hybrid legal practices. Through a comparative analysis of urban morphology, institutional frameworks, and commercial organization, the article demonstrates that the rivalry between French and British settlements was structural rather than episodic. The study further contends that Chandannagore's decline was not the result of inherent economic weakness but of geopolitical transformation. The mid-eighteenth-century militarization of imperial competition, culminating in the siege of 1757 and the reordering of Bengal's political economy, exposed deep asymmetries between the French and British imperial systems. The integration of Bengal into a British revenue-military complex under the British East India Company redirected capital, merchant networks, and institutional authority towards Calcutta, relegating Chandannagore to an enclave economy. By situating Chandannagore within both regional and global contexts, this article challenges Anglo-centric narratives and highlights the contingent nature of early modern empire-building. It underscores how naval power, fiscal capacity, and geopolitical alignment, not merely commerce, determined the divergent trajectories of rival colonial ports in Bengal.*

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## **I. Introduction**

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the *Hooghly* River corridor in Bengal emerged as one of the most competitive commercial frontiers of the early modern world. Among the European settlements that took root within the Mughal imperial framework, *Chandannagore* and *Calcutta* developed as rival ports whose contrasting trajectories illuminate the structural dynamics of colonial expansion. While *Calcutta* would eventually become the nucleus of British India, *Chandannagore* briefly stood as a formidable French commercial enclave, deeply integrated into Bengal's textile, silk, and riverine trade networks.

This article reinterprets the rivalry between these two settlements not as a simple contest of commercial efficiency but as a confrontation between divergent imperial systems. *Chandannagore* evolved through negotiated incorporation into Mughal authority, relying on Armenian merchants, Bengali *banians*, and regional banking houses to sustain flexible credit and procurement networks. *Calcutta*, on the other hand, administered by the British East India Company, increasingly combined commercial activity with territorial ambition, fortification, and fiscal consolidation. By the early eighteenth century, structural asymmetries in naval power, metropolitan capital flows, and institutional design had already begun to tilt the balance.

The decisive rupture came amid global Anglo-French conflict, particularly during the Seven Years' War (1756 to 1763), when British naval superiority enabled the 1757 capture of *Chandannagore* (Following the battle of *Plassey*). The subsequent transformation of Bengal's political economy following the Battle of *Plassey* integrated the province into a British revenue-military nexus, permanently marginalizing the French settlement.

By situating *Chandannagore* within both regional commercial networks and global geopolitical transformations, this study argues that its decline was not the result of economic failure but of structural disadvantage. The fate of *Chandannagore* and the ascent of *Calcutta* thus reveal how fiscal sovereignty, maritime power, and imperial integration, not commerce alone, determined the hierarchy of colonial cities in eighteenth-century Bengal.

## II. Founding And Early Growth (1673–1730)

The origins of *Chandannagore* must be situated within the broader expansion of European commercial activity into the Bengal *Subah* of Mughal Empire, during the late seventeenth century. While the Portuguese, Dutch, and British had already established trading networks across the *Hooghly* basin by the mid-seventeenth century, the French entered eastern India relatively late. The French East India Company, founded in 1664 under the mercantilist program of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, initially concentrated its efforts on *Surat* and the *Coromandel Coast* before gradually turning toward Bengal's lucrative textile and riverine trade systems (Haudrère, 1989).

The earliest French foothold in *Chandannagore* dates to 1673-74, when French agents obtained permission from Mughal officials to establish a modest trading post along the *Hooghly River* (Prakash, 1998). As with other European settlements in Mughal India, this entry was not achieved through conquest but through negotiation. European companies operated as subordinate commercial actors within the Mughal imperial framework, dependent on *farmans*, local patronage, and payments to provincial authorities (Subrahmanyam, 2002). The French presence thus emerged within an already dense commercial ecosystem dominated by indigenous merchants, Armenian traders, and established Asian trade circuits.

By the late seventeenth century, the French had secured more formal recognition from Mughal authorities, allowing them to expand their commercial footprint and establish a permanent factory (Furber, 1976). This consolidation marked the transformation of a fragile trading station into a durable enclave embedded within local settlement patterns. Rather than founding a new town *ex nihilo*, the French gradually integrated several pre-existing villages into a contiguous settlement along the *Hooghly's* western bank (Subramanian, 1996). Such layered urban formation was characteristic of early colonial port development in Bengal, where European enclaves emerged through adaptation to pre-existing agrarian and artisanal landscapes rather than through wholesale urban planning.

The consolidation of French authority accelerated in the final decades of the seventeenth century. The construction of Fort *d'Orléans* in the late seventeenth century signaled a new phase of institutional permanence, combining defensive architecture with administrative centralization (Arasaratnam, 1994). Fortification functioned both practically and symbolically, it protected warehouses and riverine traffic from piracy and rival European companies while also marking a claim to semi-autonomous jurisdiction within the Mughal imperial order. Around this fortified nucleus grew residential quarters, warehouses, and ecclesiastical structures, giving *Chandannagore* the recognizable morphology of an early modern colonial port town.

Commercial expansion during this formative phase was closely tied to Bengal's export economy, which supplied textiles, raw silk, and saltpeter to global markets. French merchants inserted themselves into existing procurement networks that had already attracted Dutch and British investment (Prakash, 2014). However, unlike the increasingly territorial ambitions of the British East India Company, the French presence in Bengal remained heavily dependent on negotiated coexistence with Mughal officials and indigenous commercial intermediaries. This dependence fostered a hybrid mercantile culture, characterized by collaboration with Armenian brokers, Bengali banians, and regional banking networks that mediated credit and supply chains (Das Gupta, 1989).

By the early eighteenth century, *Chandannagore* had assumed a more prominent position within the French Imperial system in India. Administrative links with *Pondicherry* strengthened, and the settlement emerged as the principal French commercial hub in Bengal (Catherine, 1996). The appointment of Joseph François Dupleix to the Bengal administration in 1730 marked a turning point in *Chandannagore's* trajectory. Under his stewardship, urban infrastructure expanded, masonry construction increased, and commercial throughput intensified, indicating that *Chandannagore* had evolved from a precarious factory into a thriving colonial port integrated into both Indian Ocean and intra-Asian trade circuits (Martineau, 1928).

Yet *Chandannagore's* early growth remained contingent rather than inevitable. Its expansion depended on a delicate equilibrium shaped by Mughal political stability, access to riverine trade arteries, and the relative absence of sustained Anglo-French hostilities in Bengal before the mid-eighteenth century. Within this window of opportunity, however, the settlement demonstrated that French commercial ambitions in eastern India were neither marginal nor symbolic. Instead, *Chandannagore's* formative decades reveal a dynamic experiment in negotiated colonial urbanism, embedded within the pluralistic commercial ecology of Mughal Bengal and shaped more by accommodation than by conquest.

## III. Chandannagore Vs Calcutta: Urban And Commercial Rivalry

By the early eighteenth century, the *Hooghly* riverine corridor had evolved into one of the most intensely contested commercial zones in the world of Indian Ocean. Within this landscape, *Chandannagore* and *Calcutta* emerged as rival European settlements whose trajectories illuminate competing models of colonial urbanism. While *Calcutta* would ultimately eclipse its French counterpart, the rivalry between the two ports during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries reveals a far more balanced and contingent contest than retrospective British narratives suggest.

The structural foundations of this rivalry lay in the divergent institutional frameworks of the French and British trading companies. The French settlement was administered under the authority of the French East India Company, which operated within a more centralized mercantilist framework tied closely to metropolitan directives. By contrast, *Calcutta* developed under the corporate sovereignty of the British East India Company, whose hybrid status as both commercial enterprise and quasi-state enabled greater institutional flexibility (Furber, 1976). This divergence shaped not only administrative structures but also patterns of urban growth and commercial regulation.

Urban morphology reflected these institutional differences. *Chandannagore* developed incrementally through the integration of pre-existing settlements along the *Hooghly* River, producing a linear riverside town characterized by dispersed mercantile zones and a relatively porous boundary between European and indigenous quarters (Arasaratnam, 1994). *Calcutta*, by contrast, evolved into a more consolidated tripartite urban formation comprising the European enclave around Fort William, the commercial intermediary zone of the Black Town (*the northern, predominantly native Bengali area of the city*), and surrounding suburban expansions (Marshall et al., 1987). This more centralized spatial organization facilitated tighter administrative control and revenue extraction, allowing the British settlement to scale more rapidly in both demographic and commercial terms.

Commercial organization constituted another critical axis of divergence. *Chandannagore's* mercantile culture relied heavily on negotiated partnerships with Armenian traders, Bengali *baniyas*, and regional banking houses, producing a relatively open and collaborative trading environment (Prakash, 1998). The French, lacking strong naval backing and metropolitan capital flows, depended on flexible credit networks and inter-Asian trade circuits to sustain their operations. *Calcutta*, by contrast, increasingly benefited from the British Company's expanding fiscal-military infrastructure, particularly after the consolidation of its privileges under Mughal *farmans* and its growing influence over regional revenue systems (Stern, 2011). This institutional backing enabled the British to transition from merchant intermediaries into territorial stakeholders more rapidly than their French rivals.

Legal culture further distinguished the two settlements. French administration introduced elements of civil law traditions derived from metropolitan jurisprudence, while British governance evolved through the transplantation of common law principles adapted to colonial conditions (Benton, 2002). These differing legal frameworks shaped patterns of dispute resolution, property ownership, and commercial arbitration, influencing the preferences of indigenous merchants who navigated multiple jurisdictions along the *Hooghly* corridor. In certain contexts, the relative informality and negotiability of French legal practices proved attractive to non-European traders seeking alternatives to the increasingly bureaucratized British system (Subramanian, 1996).

Despite these contrasts, *Chandannagore* and *Calcutta* were deeply interconnected rather than isolated competitors. Merchants frequently operated across both settlements, arbitrating differences in taxation, legal regimes, and customs duties (Das Gupta, 1979). This fluid commercial geography complicates binary narratives of rivalry by revealing a shared regional economy in which European enclaves functioned as nodes within broader indigenous trading networks. Yet, even within this interconnected system, structural asymmetries were already emerging by the early eighteenth century.

One of the most decisive advantages enjoyed by *Calcutta* was its access to expanding military protection and maritime supremacy. The British Company's growing naval capacity in the Bay of Bengal enabled it to safeguard shipping lanes and exert pressure on rival European settlements (Rodger, 2006). *Chandannagore*, lacking comparable naval backing, remained vulnerable to geopolitical shifts beyond Bengal. This asymmetry would prove decisive during periods of Anglo-French conflict, when maritime dominance translated directly into urban vulnerability.

Equally significant was the question of metropolitan investment. While both European companies operated within mercantilist frameworks, the British East India Company benefited from deeper capital markets and a more robust integration with Britain's emerging fiscal-military state (Cain et al., 2014). This financial infrastructure allowed sustained reinvestment in fortifications, administrative apparatus, and military logistics, accelerating *Calcutta's* transformation into a proto-imperial capital. *Chandannagore*, by contrast, remained constrained by the fluctuating fortunes of French imperial policy and inconsistent capital flows from Europe.

By the mid eighteenth century, therefore, the rivalry between *Chandannagore* and *Calcutta* had already begun to tilt structurally in favour of the British settlement, even before the decisive geopolitical ruptures of the mid-eighteenth century. *Chandannagore* remained commercially vibrant and culturally cosmopolitan, but its growth was increasingly bounded by institutional and geopolitical limitations that constrained its long-term scalability. The comparative trajectory of these two riverine ports thus underscores the importance of structural asymmetries, rather than simple commercial competition in shaping the urban hierarchy of colonial Bengal.

Viewed in this light, *Chandannagore's* eventual marginalization appears less as an inevitable outcome and more as the product of cumulative divergences in institutional design, fiscal capacity, and military backing. The early eighteenth-century rivalry between the French and British settlements along the *Hooghly* was not merely a contest between two towns but a confrontation between competing models of colonial expansion, one

rooted in negotiated mercantile hybridity, the other in an increasingly territorial and militarized corporate sovereignty. It was this structural divergence, more than local commercial dynamics, that ultimately determined the fate of the two cities.

#### **IV. Why Chandannagore Failed And Calcutta Succeeded: Structural And Geopolitical Explanations**

The divergent trajectories of *Chandannagore* and *Calcutta* cannot be explained solely through local commercial competition. *Chandannagore* did not collapse because it lacked commercial vitality; nor did *Calcutta* triumph merely because it was economically superior. Rather, the decisive factors were structural and geopolitical. The imbalance between French and British naval power, metropolitan investment, and fiscal-military capacity, combined with the transformative consequences of the Battle of *Plassey* (1757) reshaped the political economy of Bengal in ways that permanently marginalized the French settlement. The decline of *Chandannagore*, therefore, was geopolitical rather than purely economic.

##### *Indigenous Merchant Networks and the Limits of French Leverage*

In the early eighteenth century, both settlements depended heavily on indigenous commercial intermediaries. Armenian merchants, Bengali *baniyas*, and major banking houses such as the *Jagat Seths* operated across European jurisdictions, extending credit, mediating contracts, and stabilizing long-distance trade (*Das Gupta, 1979*). *Chandannagore* benefited significantly from these networks. French officials cultivated Armenian brokers and Bengali financiers who provided access to textile procurement zones and inland credit markets (*Prakash, 1998*).

However, the mobility of indigenous capital also limited French leverage. Merchant houses prioritized security, enforceability of contracts, and political stability over European loyalties (*Subramanian, 1996*). As the British East India Company's political influence expanded, especially after 1757, these same merchant groups gradually reoriented toward *Calcutta*, where British military protection and revenue authority offered more predictable returns (*Marshall, 1987*). The French reliance on negotiated commercial networks, once a strength, became a vulnerability when political conditions shifted. *Chandannagore* lacked the coercive backing necessary to anchor indigenous capital permanently within its orbit.

##### *The Turning Point: Anglo-French Conflicts in a Global War*

The structural fragility of *Chandannagore* was exposed during the mid-eighteenth century, when Anglo-French rivalry in the Carnatic spilled into Bengal. The outbreak of the global conflict later known as the Seven Years' War transformed local commercial rivalry into imperial warfare (*Anderson, 2001*).

In March 1757, British forces under Robert Clive, supported by Admiral Charles Watson's fleet, launched a coordinated assault on *Chandannagore* (*Orme, 2025*). The siege demonstrated the decisive importance of naval superiority. British warships forced passage along the *Hooghly* River, silenced French batteries, and bombarded Fort *d'Orléans* into submission (*Furber, 1976*). The attack was explicitly ordered to neutralize French influence in Bengal before confronting *Siraj-ud-Daulah* (the last independent *Nawab* of the Bengal *Subah*) (*Marshall, 2005*).

The fall of *Chandannagore* was not simply a local military defeat; it reflected a broader imbalance between the French and British imperial systems. Britain's expanding naval dominance in the Indian Ocean, rooted in superior fiscal mobilization and maritime logistics, enabled it to project sustained force into Bengal's riverine environment (*Rodger, 2006*). The French navy, overstretched and underfunded, could not offer comparable protection (*Haudrère, 1989*). This asymmetry proved decisive. *Chandannagore's* vulnerability was geopolitical, not commercial.

##### *The Fiscal-Military State and Metropolitan Investment*

Underlying British military success was a deeper structural advantage, integration into Britain's emerging fiscal-military state. The British East India Company drew upon metropolitan capital markets, state-backed credit, and naval infrastructure that far exceeded the resources available to the French Company (*Stern, 2011*). Britain's capacity to mobilize taxation, public debt, and naval expenditure created a systemic advantage in imperial competition (*Cain et al, 2014*).

French imperial policy, by contrast, suffered from inconsistent metropolitan investment and strategic prioritization of European theaters (*Martineau, 1928*). Even during periods of commercial expansion, *Chandannagore* never received sustained infrastructural or military reinforcement on the scale enjoyed by *Calcutta*. Thus, while both settlements initially operated as trading enclaves within Mughal sovereignty, only *Calcutta* evolved into a fortified, revenue-backed imperial hub capable of defending and expanding its position.

After Plassey: Structural Marginalization

If the siege of 1757 exposed *Chandannagore's* vulnerability, the events that followed ensured its marginalization. The British victory at the Battle of *Plassey* fundamentally altered Bengal's political economy (*Marshall, 2006*). With the installation of a compliant *nawab* and subsequent acquisition of revenue rights (*diwani*) in 1765, the British East India Company secured direct control over Bengal's fiscal resources (*Bayly, 1987*).

This transformation created what scholars describe as a revenue-military nexus; taxation funded armies, which in turn secured further territorial expansion (*Stern, 2011*). French settlements, including *Chandannagore*, now operated within a British-dominated fiscal environment. Customs restrictions, surveillance, and political oversight curtailed French trade (*Furber, 1976*). Even when restored under treaty provisions, *Chandannagore* functioned as a constrained enclave rather than an autonomous competitor.

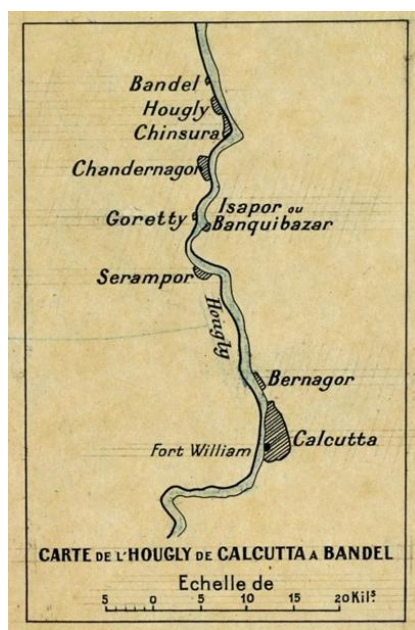
Indigenous merchant networks again adapted pragmatically. Armenian and Bengali financiers increasingly concentrated their operations in *Calcutta*, where British political authority ensured enforcement of contracts and protection of capital (*Subramanian, 1996*). The gravitational pull of British-controlled revenue and military structures redirected regional commerce toward *Calcutta*, accelerating its transformation into the premier colonial metropolis of eastern India.

From Rival Port to Enclave Economy

By the late eighteenth century, *Chandannagore's* commercial autonomy had effectively dissolved. Though it retained cultural vitality and symbolic importance within the French imperial imagination, its economic base contracted into an enclave economy dependent on British tolerance (*Haudrère, 1989*). *Calcutta*, by contrast, expanded dramatically emerging as the administrative and financial center of British India.

## V. Conclusion

*Chandannagore* did not fail because it lacked access to trade networks or indigenous support. In its early decades, it successfully integrated Armenian brokers, Bengali financiers, and regional credit systems into a vibrant commercial enclave. Its decline followed the militarization of imperial rivalry and the fiscal consolidation of British power in Bengal. The fate of *Chandannagore* and the rise of *Calcutta* therefore reveal a broader truth about eighteenth-century imperial competition; commercial vitality alone was insufficient without naval supremacy and fiscal sovereignty. The marginalization of the French port was not predetermined by economic weakness but produced by geopolitical transformation. *Calcutta* succeeded because it became embedded within a global imperial system capable of mobilizing revenue, projecting force, and restructuring regional trade. *Chandannagore*, lacking such structural backing, was relegated from rival to relic.



**Image 1.** 1911 annotated copy of a 1749 French manuscript map of the Hooghly River with the European settlements and factories along its banks: Bandel (Portuguese), Hooghly (Dutch, previously British), Chinsurah (Dutch), Chandernagore (French), Goretty (French), Banquibazar (Imperial/Austrian), Serampore (Danish), Bernagore (Dutch), Fort William/Calcutta (British).

**Source:** <http://www.e-corpus.org/eng/notices/73203-Carte-de-l-Hougly-de-Calcutta-a-Bandel.html>

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