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# Sagor: A Land of Promise? c. 1770s—1850

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Figure 1: Situating Sagor Island



*Source: Author  
Map Not to Scale*

## Introduction

The first landfall at the mouth of the Hugli, the Sagor Island is located about 77 miles away from Calcutta and approximately 40 miles away from Diamond Harbour in the mainland. It is flanked by the Hugli in the west and Channel Creek in the east. It opens into the Bay of

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Bengal from the southern side. The place has a special mythological significance connected to the story of the origin of the Bhagirathi, and its mingling with the sea. To commemorate this, the devotees from all over the places congregate yearly for a holy dip during the winter solstice when a *melas* held at the southern sea face of the island.

Sagor; a twelfth century island port known in history as Chandecan<sup>ii</sup>, was also associated with the Hindu superstitious ritual of human sacrifice, predators like crocodiles, sharks, snakes and the deadliest of them all—the Royal Bengal Tigers. It was a haunt of the ‘Mugg’<sup>iii</sup> pirates in seventeenth century as confirmed by the Jesuit priests Manrique<sup>vi</sup> and Cabral<sup>v</sup> in the 1630s. Though initially the *bhati*<sup>vi</sup> and eastern delta remained inaccessible to the Mughals; in the course of their eastward ho, they became familiar with Sagor and its neighbourhood. Arakan edged with fringes of eastern Bengal and Sagor stood as a buffer between expanding Arakan and Mughals. The Mughals checked Arakan and the major power blocs of *bhati*; Isha Khan and Pratapaditya. Some claimed that Pratap had a naval bastion in Sagor. Pratap’s decimation marked the high point of Mughal penetration into Bengal.

The history of Sagor was marked by a period of lull between late seventeenth and mid eighteenth centuries, till subsequent attempts were undertaken by the British to develop Sagor as a sustainable revenue generating land. This article attempts to explore how far it was possible to meet the particular objective within the select period. Did the Bhagirathi at its meeting point with the Bay play a proactive role?

### **Land Reclamation at Sagor**

The travel narratives and diaries had enumerated old history of human settlements and the natural bounties of Sagor despite being under tidal influences. As early as the 1670s, the areas along the

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Channel Creek were dotted with Mughal apiaries and salt pans<sup>vii</sup>. The water bodies were full of varieties of fish which was very cheap<sup>viii</sup>. The forest had a rich reservoir of woods<sup>ix</sup>. But the area ‘had not been continuously inhabited except in modern times’<sup>x</sup>.

The eighteenth nineteenth centuries European accounts portrayed Sagor as a gloomy landmark as the European visitors at the river’s ingress were confronted with the ‘depressing sight of mud-banks, flooded forests and tangled vegetation’<sup>xi</sup>, empty stretches, floating corpses on their onward journey towards the mainland. Predators’ supposed presence definitely added to Sagor’s dark image. But the drive to amass revenue prompted the Company to penetrate the island of despair. In 1811 clearing of the island overrun by ‘matted undergrowth’<sup>xii</sup> and mangrove forests<sup>xiii</sup> had begun. The extensive forested land of the Sundarbans crowning the northern edge of the Bay of Bengal, was not incorporated within the framework of the Permanent Settlement<sup>xiv</sup>, so Sagor too was treated separately.

Lieutenant Blane computed Sagor’s area to be 143,550 acres<sup>xv</sup> which was to be brought under tillage. At this point, mention may be made of a map delineating the ‘Plan of Saugor Island Taken in May and June 1811’ by Lieutenant Engineer G.R. Blane<sup>xvi</sup>. The map showed the division of land into at least 16 units, each unit with a particular name, mostly of natives, and a number assigned. Probably this indicated that an early attempt was made in 1811 to distribute the Sagor land on lease involving the Indians. There weresome names with corresponding numbers of the allotted land<sup>xvii</sup>. For example:

Maharaj Sing, No. 32

Gooroopersad Cur, No. 37

Durpnarain Cur, No. 36

Radakaunt Deb, No. 12

Ganganarain No. 6

For some reason it was abandoned. In November 1811 one

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Mr. Beaumont got permission from the Board of Revenue to start a factory for buff leather on a hundred acres of land. In 1812 he applied for a land grant on a cultivating tenure as the Government offered favourable terms. He was permitted to hold 300 *begahs* of land<sup>xviii</sup>. In 1812, the Revenue Department was encouraging both the British and the locals to cultivate the island. The maximum holding offered was 10,000 *beeghas* and the minimum was 500 *beeghas*. The British believed that its early cultivation would lead to the 'future increase of the public revenue'<sup>xix</sup>.

But Beaumont's application got cancelled. Next, to involve the Indians in the reclamation of the Sagor island, Mr. Trower, the Collector of the 24 Parganas, formed a joint stock company comprising distinguished Indians and Europeans in Calcutta in 1818. Saugor Island Society began with a capital of two and a half lakhs. The committee of around thirteen trustees formed the core management. The Indians held out a quarter of the share<sup>xx</sup>. The entire island was leased out to it at an assessment of four *annas* per *bigha* to be paid even beyond thirty years.

The land held by the Society was exempt from revenue payment for a period of thirty years<sup>xxi</sup>. Trowerland, the central part of the island was made ready for cultivation. In the four northern segments namely Trowerland, Ferintosh, Mud Point, Shikarpur and Dhobelat in the south; considerable progress was made. The company had secured a grant of the whole island on the basis of certain terms, the failure of which entailed forfeiture of the grant.

The project had to be abandoned due to natural hazards<sup>xxii</sup>. In 1834, the northern part of Sagor was taken over by Messrs. Hare, Macpherson, Hunter and Campbell who began rice cultivation and salt manufacture. That part experienced some prosperity and human settlement. However natural disasters came in the way of its continued development. After the survey of 1863, around 31,190

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*bighas* of land was reclaimed, but due to subsequent inundations only 2,750 *bighas* remained intact. The northern part of the island was brought under plough, though the southern portion remained under the cover of jungle<sup>xxiii</sup>. So till the 1860s, at best a haphazard progress was noted.

### **Various Discussions on Plans to Develop the Sagor Island**

Other than the revenue expected from rice cultivation and the making of salt<sup>xxiv</sup>; the Company officials had thought of setting up a fishery, anchorage, marine hospital, and nurturing Sagor as a tourist cum health resort.

#### **Fishery**

In the early 70s two European gentlemen named J. Bright and T. Hamilton had proposed to Warren Hastings and his Council of Revenue to start a fishery in the island ‘as Clearing and Cultivating waist Lands is for the Companys Interest as a successfull fishery will produce a considerable Revenue and be beneficial to the Publick’<sup>xxv</sup>. The correspondence further clarified that the senders had planned to pay the usual duties on fish and all productions of the island when brought to market, at the expiration of ten years, and also the usual rents for such part of the island as may be cultivated, and when required would officially declare an exact account of the quantity of land cultivated<sup>xxvi</sup>.

#### **Anchorage**

Cabral in 1630<sup>xxvii</sup>, the Agents for the factory at Bengal; Master<sup>xxviii</sup> and Hedges<sup>xxix</sup> in the 1670s, mentioned the island’s potentialities as a deep sea port. The Bengal Public Consultations<sup>xxx</sup> of 1715 acknowledged the strategic advantage enjoyed by Sagor.

By the early 18th century the bulk of the Dutch, British and Indian trade was being transported down the Bhagirathi-Hugli channel; though shoals and sandbanks hindered the passage of large cargo

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ships up to Hooghly. This called for a safe anchorage of bulkier vessels at harbours closer to the sea and transshipment of the cargo up in smaller crafts. Initially big vessels loaded and unloaded at Balasore. Later Hijli at the confluence of the Rasulpore and Rupnarain rivers came to be preferred over Balasore. Subsequently the cargo was transported to the emerging metropolis of Calcutta in small vessels from Khejuri, then Falta and Diamond Harbour. But later those mooring stations were abandoned.

Again Sagor was mentioned as a suitable anchorage in 1776 by the Company's hydrographer John Ritchie<sup>xxxii</sup>. At Sagor the connectivity 'between the relevant channel and the sea was increasingly good'<sup>xxxii</sup>. Till the 1830s the large ships belonging to private parties lay moored in Saugor Roads<sup>xxxiii</sup>. But officially Sagor was not developed as a full fledged port.

### **Marine Hospital cum Health Resort**

Though there were no consistent plans to encourage Sagor as an anchorage; Sagor was looked upon as a prospective health resort of the Europeans in Bengal. The Europeans in Bengal had difficulty in getting acclimatized to tropical heat, sultry monsoon, lack of sanitation and associated diseases. Before the advent of the railways it was not easy to have a reprieve from the Bengal summer. The Himalayan hill stations were discovered mostly in the mid nineteenth century. At the most they went for brief vacations in 'the healthy situations'<sup>xxxiv</sup> of Barasat, Gyretty, Chandannagar and Chnuchura.

Moreover the sick in the marshes of Bengal looked for a retreat with an 'insular climate'<sup>xxxv</sup> and 'sea air'<sup>xxxvi</sup> in the neighbouring islands of Sagor or the small isle of the Sandheads. In a letter dated June 30, 1785, to the Governor General John Macpherson, from Messrs. I. Taylor, an estimate was proposed to build a marine hospital at Sagor on account of its healthy situation<sup>xxxvii</sup>.

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## **Supporting Infrastructure to Develop Sagor**

The plan to ensure an easy accessibility to the island and develop it into a popular retreat called for forging an effective connectivity and building rest houses.

### **Lighthouse**

A lighthouse was built in the southern part of the island at Beguakhali as early as 1808<sup>xxxviii</sup>. But a lot of correspondences were exchanged post1808 regarding clearing a site for a lighthouse. Probably the previous one was abandoned and a better site was chosen.

The proposal for the lighthouse was the beginning of a chain of developmental strategies conceived by the EEIC. ‘It being the intention of Government to erect a Light House on the Island it may be necessary not only to retain the spot intended for the Light House, but likewise some additional ground in its vicinity<sup>xxxix</sup> and also some other spots for public utility. It was further decided to cultivate the land kept aside ‘with the rest of the Island as it may otherwise prove a harbor of Tigers’<sup>xl</sup>.

### **Lodging House**

According to an archival record dated 1839, the important citizens of Calcutta proposed to lay out large sums for a ‘lodging house’ on Saugor island to which the agreeable accompaniments of baths, palanquins, horses and elephants were to be added—all ‘for the benefit of the sick who require sea air’<sup>xli</sup>.

### **Establishing Connectivity between Lower Bengal and Calcutta**

Diamond Harbour, Khejuri, Hijli, Kulpi; had served as anchorages to big crafts and functioned as rudimentary settlements for a while. So connectivity between those places and Calcutta had to be established. By the mid nineteenth century, the region between Calcutta and Sagor was networked by dak boats, horse drawn postal carts, *harkaras*, post offices (in Khejuri and Kulpi in 1774-76 and 1793-

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95). Mails from Khejuri were initially brought to Kulpi in little boats and dispatched to Calcutta. Semaphoric connectivity<sup>xlii</sup> was forged between Calcutta and Diamond Harbour, Calcutta and Kaikhali to be extended later upto Sagor.

In 1852 the Superintendent of the Electric Telegraph in India, O'Shaughnessy forged telegraphic connectivity between Khejuri and Calcutta covering a distance of 82 miles<sup>xliii</sup>. In 1855 Sagor at the backwaters of hinterland, got linked up with the major army cantonments in north and central India and important towns like Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, Agra till Peshawar<sup>xliv</sup>. Thus the British were planning to provide an infrastructural support to bring Sagor within the orbit of mainland.

### **Why Sagor Could Not Take Off as a Revenue Generating Land Between Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries?**

#### **Natural Hazards**

##### **Elemental Toll**

Being located at the edge of the delta, Sagor has been ravaged by cyclone, flood, associated epidemics, land depression that acted as hindrances to settled ways of life. Floods of 1684 and cyclone of 1688 that killed around 60,000 people<sup>xlv</sup>; cyclone and storm wave of 1707; a high intensity earthquake of 1737, cyclones of 1833, June 1842, October 1848, June 1852, 1864 and 1867<sup>xlvi</sup> need special mention.

##### **Tiger Menace**

Way back in 1776 official correspondences were exchanged on proposal for a new harbour along the Channel Creek. At the same time some doubts were expressed regarding its viability in an 'impenetrable state' 'infested with Tygers'<sup>xlvii</sup> along the eastern fringe of the island watered by the Channel Creek. In fact the notorious Sagor tiger was immortalised by a mechanical toy based on the real





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the sand heads. Again, the continuous widening of the lower section of the Hugli 'by the action of winds and currents on its banks'<sup>liv</sup> diminished the scouring power of the stream. This also left more room for the 'channels to change from side to side'<sup>lv</sup>.

### **Channels**

Negotiating through the shifting channels was a problem. They were created due to the great disproportion between the two sections of the river. The upper section above Kulpi represented a full fledged river, while the lower section from Kulpi to the sea was more of an estuary. Water passing through the upper section could produce enough currents to clear out the lower section partially. The remaining portion turned into 'a great shallow of loose half floating sand' shifting along with the water. A channel formed by cutting through those loose solid particles cannot be permanent in nature<sup>lvi</sup>. In December 1776, though the middle channel was quite active and facilitated the passage of ships from the deep water anchorage at Sagor: the eastern channel too was slowly making its presence felt<sup>vii</sup>. In fact 'this great depth of water about Sagor, clearly accounts for the shallow water at the Hidgelle side; and also for the decreasing depth of the middle channel, to the southward of Sagor since the year 1770'<sup>lviii</sup>.

But by 1813 it seemed that the western channels could open and facilitate the commerce<sup>lix</sup>. In the mean time the middle channel from Sagor became quite narrow. Also the head of the eastern channel had shrunk considerably. Further, there was an apprehension that the Hugli might choke up and lose its navigability. The Channel Creek could have offered passage at least to vessels of shallow draft and boats<sup>lx</sup>. The big vessels could not have passed 'both from the shallowness of the water at the entrance near Mud Point and narrowness of the channel in the upper parts.

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## Blockades

An official correspondence by Garstin, the Superintendent, Sagor Island, took note that the entrance to the Hugli by skirting Sagor needed skilled maneuverings because there existed various sandbanks and shoals below it, close to the Edmonstone's<sup>lxi</sup>. Then a major hurdle awaited at Khejuri close to the northern tip of Sagor as some change in Damodar led to the choking of the western passage leading to Khejuri<sup>lxii</sup>.

The most dangerous spot called the 'James and Mary Sand' was located just below Falta. The Rupnarain, Damodar and Hugli met each other randomly with their respective currents lashing at each other. The Hugli together with Damodar flowed south to meet with a point of land, then turned westward and merged with the Rupnarayan. The united course met the Halidi and flowed straight towards the Bay<sup>lxiii</sup>. The sediments of the two rivers located six miles apart from each other at their junction with the Hugli; used to get sprayed separately. Thus the dreaded moving shoals were created and named after the big ship 'James and Mary' that got wrecked there; apart from many other vessels. Thus reaching Sagor and proceeding upwards towards Calcutta involved crossing many hurdles.

## Conclusion

Such risks at the river's entrance triggered the concept of pilot service. Till at least 1792, the EEIC's pilot service was not standardized and efforts were on to include 'men of proper education and knowledge' so that when they tended to be thrown off the common tract, they were not entirely at a loss in what way to direct their vessels<sup>lxiv</sup>. Instances of frequent losses of vessels at the Hugli were common as they were manned by unqualified pilots<sup>lxv</sup>.

*The Asiatic Journal* noted in September 1800 that there was perhaps no part in the world where professional pilots suffered more anxiety

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than those navigating towards the island<sup>lxvi</sup>. Even a fairly strong gale or a rapid tide could scour away some sand to deposit it to a different area. So a pilot having a clear passage one month might have to locate a completely new passage in his next trip after undertaking a ‘fresh survey’.

But the projectors overlooked the perils involved in travelling to and fro Sagor. Neither did they contain themselves only ‘to the banishment of tigers, the growth of rice and the making of salt’. Rather they imagined that ‘farms and granaries, and towns and busy population shall succeed’<sup>lxvii</sup> and that ultimately Sagor would blossom as the Brighton<sup>lxviii</sup> of Bengal despite its vulnerability to natural hazards and associated epidemics. Further the long term alterations in the river like its choking and diminishing flow; its loss of headwater etc, which came in the way of the connectivity between Sagor and Calcutta port; were not considered.

Despite the callousness towards geography and environment, the European penetration changed Sagor’s image from ‘noxious wilderness’<sup>lxix</sup> into a more hospitable space that awaited future explorations. In 2015, a deep sea port has been proposed at Sagor that would be the gateway to north east and South East Asia<sup>lxx</sup>. India’s first chunnel or under water rail and road tunnel is being planned for a run of three kilometers. That would connect the northern tip of Sagor with Kakdwip, at the Hugli in a stretch called Channel Creek as that would be crucial for the operation of the port<sup>lxxi</sup>. So the worth of Sagor is being assessed even today.

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