

# The Historical Trajectory of Kolkata's Riverine Cityscape: A Study of the Ghats from Colonial Origins to the Present

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## Abstract

The city of Kolkata, formerly Calcutta, owes its existence and historical prominence to its strategic location on the eastern bank of the Hugli River. Integral to this riverine identity are its numerous ghats—stepped embankments that have served as the city's primary interface with its lifeblood waterway. This paper traces the historical evolution of Kolkata's ghats, examining their transformation from simple access points in a pre-colonial settlement to multifaceted hubs of commerce, religion, social life, and colonial power. Focusing on four key case studies—Sarada Mayer Ghat, Mullick Ghat, Babooghat, and Princep Ghat—this study analyzes how these spaces have reflected and shaped the city's complex socio-cultural fabric. Through a chronological analysis spanning the pre-1911 colonial heyday, the transitional period of rising nationalism, and the post-independence era, the paper argues that the ghats are not merely functional structures but are living archives. They are palimpsests on which the city's narratives of tradition, modernity, social stratification, community life, and colonial legacy have been inscribed, evolving in function and significance while remaining central to Kolkata's urban identity.

**Keywords:** Kolkata, Calcutta, Ghats, Hooghly River, Colonial History, Urban Landscape, Cityscape.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The genesis of Kolkata is fundamentally tied to the Hugli River, a major distributary of the Ganges. The city emerged from the amalgamation of three villages—Sutanuti, Gobindapur, and Kalikata—following the establishment of a trading post by the British East India Company under Job Charnock around 1690 (Mukhopadhyay, 21). Its riverine location propelled its rapid growth, culminating in its status as the capital of British India from 1772 to 1911. Central to this development were the city's approximately 35 significant ghats, which functioned as the pulsating arteries of urban life.

These ghats were far more than simple landings; they were crucial nexuses for trade and passenger transport, vital centres for religious rituals, and essential spaces for daily ablutions and social congregation. Each ghat, often named after a deity, an influential family, or a community, became a microcosm of the city's diverse and stratified society. This paper explores this historical trajectory, examining how the ghats evolved and what role they played in the cityscape of colonial and post-colonial Kolkata.

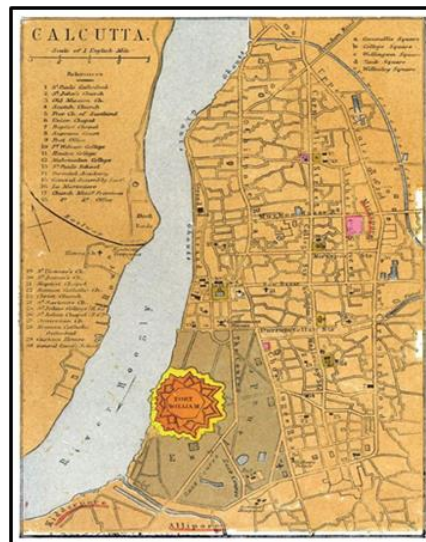
## 2. The Colonial Foundation and the Rise of a Riverine Metropolis

Following the British victory at the Battle of Plassey in 1757, Calcutta was firmly established as the centre of British power in India. For the next 140 years, it flourished as the opulent "Second City of the Empire,"

witnessing immense infrastructural growth and becoming a nucleus of commerce, administration, and education (Chattopadhyay, 21). This era also fostered the Bengal Renaissance, a period of profound social and intellectual ferment that shaped modern India. The city's ghats were a direct reflection of this colonial dynamism.

Unlike the more uniformly religious ghats of ancient cities like Varanasi, Kolkata's ghats present a unique tapestry of colonial-era architectural ambition, Bengali utilitarianism, and bustling commerce woven together with sacred rituals. They served concurrently as transport hubs, marketplaces, and social gathering points. Architecturally, they showcase a remarkable blend, from the imposing colonial grandeur of Princep Ghat to the functional, chaotic energy of Mullick Ghat. This multifaceted character, shaped by Kolkata's history as a colonial port and a cultural melting pot, makes its riverfront a unique urban landscape.

**MAP 1: GLIMPSES OF CALCUTTA (1862)**



**Source: Kalikata Darpan by Radharaman Mitra (1952)**

### 3. Case Studies: The Evolving Identity of Key Ghats

To understand the diverse roles of these riverfront spaces, this study focuses on four exemplary ghats, each with a distinct character shaped by its origins and usage.

#### 3.1 Sarada Mayer Ghat, Bagbazar

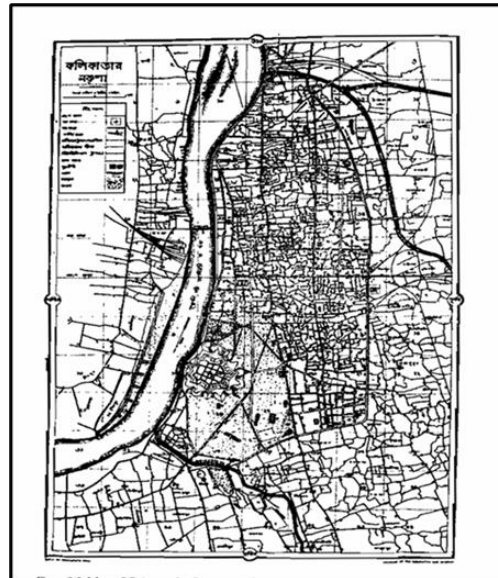
Located in North Kolkata, this ghat's importance is not derived from architectural grandeur but from its profound spiritual significance. It is intrinsically linked to Ma Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother and spiritual consort of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. During her residence at the nearby Udbodhan House (1909-1920), she regularly used this ghat for bathing. This simple act infused the space with sanctity, transforming it into a place of pilgrimage for followers of the Ramakrishna Mission. Its function remains primarily devotional, a serene space for quiet contemplation and ritual, standing in stark contrast to the city's more commercial ghats.

#### 3.2 Mullick Ghat (and Zenana Ghat)

Constructed around 1855 by the affluent zamindar Rammohan Mullick, this ghat originally served a crucial socio-cultural purpose. Its alternate name, 'Zenana Ghat,' refers to its function as a designated, secluded space for women from elite, purdah-observing households to perform their religious ablutions in

privacy. It stands as a tangible architectural manifestation of the gender segregation and social hierarchies of 19th-century Bengali society. Today, while the original structure remains, its historical purpose has been overshadowed by its transformation into the site of one of Asia's largest and most vibrant wholesale flower markets. It is now a place of intense, chaotic commerce, where the sacred (flowers for worship) and the profane (the frenetic pace of trade) converge daily.

## MAP 2: COLONIAL CALCUTTA: CAPITAL OF INDIA (1905)



Source: *The Early History and Growth of Calcutta* by Raja Binaya Krishna Deb (1905)

### 3.3 Babooghat

Formally named Baboo Raj Chunder Doss Ghat and built around 1830, this structure is a prime example of native philanthropy intersecting with colonial aesthetics. Funded by the wealthy zamindar Babu Raj Chandra Das, its imposing Doric colonnaded pavilion reflects the European neoclassical style popular during the era. Historically, it was a major landing point for passengers and goods, making it a vital transport hub connecting Calcutta with riverine routes. It remains a critical site for Hindu rituals, especially for ancestral rites (pind daan) and the immersion of deities after major festivals. Babooghat thus embodies a confluence of native cultural practice, colonial architectural influence, and essential urban functionality.

### 3.4 Princep Ghat

Built in 1841, Princep Ghat is perhaps the most potent symbol of colonial commemoration on the riverfront. Its stunning white Palladian porch was erected in memory of James Prinsep, the brilliant scholar renowned for deciphering the Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts. Unlike the other ghats, its primary historical function was not trade or mass ritual but ceremony and leisure for the British elite and anglicized Indians. It served as a formal landing for dignitaries and a scenic spot for evening promenades. Today, this recreational and aesthetic purpose continues, making it a popular public space for leisure, photography, and tourism, embodying a blend of historical monumentality and contemporary urban relaxation.

## 4. The Ghats' Impact on the Cityscape: A Chronological Perspective

The socio-economic and cultural impact of these ghats evolved significantly over time, mirroring the city's own historical trajectory.

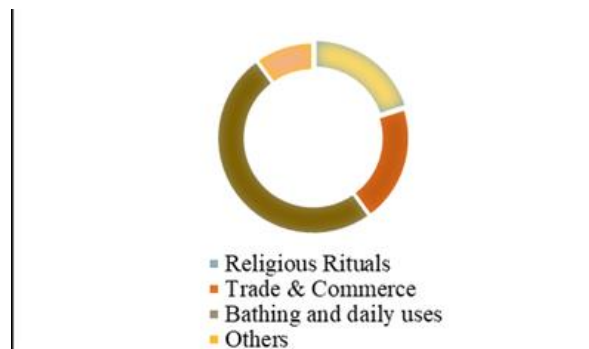
## 4.1 Before 1911: The Imperial Heyday

During Calcutta's zenith as the imperial capital, the ghats were pulsating arteries of life, each reflecting a specific facet of its stratified society. Mayer Ghat served the traditional Bengali Hindu populace in North Calcutta. The Mullick (Zenana) Ghat underscored the gender segregation of the era, while Babooghat represented the confluence of Bengali wealth and the functional needs of a bustling colonial city. In stark contrast, Princep Ghat was an exclusive space for the ruling elite, embodying colonial power and leisure culture. The riverbank was a stage upon which the city's complex hierarchies of class, race, and gender were performed daily through a diverse array of activities.

## 4.2 Between 1911-1947: Transition and Nationalism

After the capital shifted to Delhi, Calcutta entered a period of political ferment and rising nationalism. The ghats continued to be vital microcosms of the city's socio-economic life. Mayer Ghat and Babooghat remained anchors of traditional Bengali socio-cultural and religious life, reinforcing community bonds amidst the rising tide of nationalism. Mullick Ghat's flower market represented a vibrant node of commerce intertwined with cultural practices. Princep Ghat, while still a symbol of the colonial milieu, began to be used by a wider cross-section of the affluent Indian public. The ghats became spaces where tradition, colonial influence, and burgeoning nationalist sentiment coexisted and often collided.

**FIG: 1: PRIMARY HISTORICAL FUNCTIONS OF GHATSCAPES**

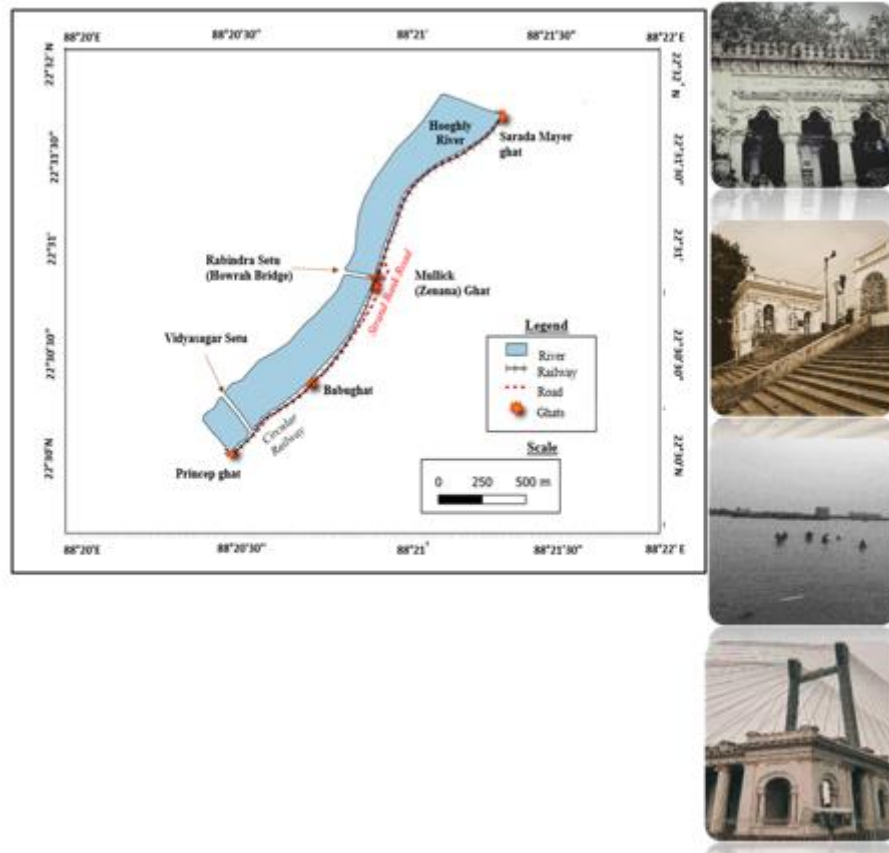


**Data Source: KMC**

## 4.3 Post-1947 and the Present Century: Adaptation and Modern Challenges

Following India's independence and the trauma of Partition, Kolkata's ghats adapted to new realities. While their fundamental functions continued, their context changed. Sarada Mayer Ghat sustained its spiritual importance, while Mullick Ghat's commercial identity as a flower market solidified, its 'Zenana' past fading into memory. Babooghat remained a critical, if increasingly strained, transport node. Princep Ghat, however, saw the most visible transformation. Benefitting from beautification drives, it evolved from a purely commemorative monument into a prime recreational and aesthetic destination for all citizens, its colonial heritage re-contextualized within a modern, independent city. In the 21st century, these ghats represent a dynamic tension. They are simultaneously heritage sites, functional transport nodes, vibrant commercial hubs, and evolving cultural spaces, all facing the modern challenges of pollution, urban pressure, and the need for sustainable management.

**FIG: 2: HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE GHATSCAPES**



**Data Source: Author**

## 5. Conclusion

The historical trajectory of Kolkata is inextricably linked with the Hugli River, and the ghats have always been the most tangible expression of this relationship. They were never just simple landings, but dynamic, multifaceted hubs that facilitated commerce, transport, and sacred ritual, while reflecting the city's distinct socio-cultural strata. As Calcutta evolved from a colonial trading post to an imperial capital and finally to a post-independence metropolis, the function and significance of its ghats shifted in response. Some faded in prominence, while others, like the four examined in this study, adapted and retained their importance. Today, the ghats of Kolkata stand as poignant chronicles of the city's past—embodying its commercial ambitions, colonial encounters, spiritual life, and enduring dependence on the river. They are a living heritage, forever etched into the city's unique identity and historical landscape.

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