



Dacca.

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Dacca.

By Johannes Humlum¹⁾.

With the partition of British India in 1947 the predominantly Muslim districts of Bengal were united as the Eastern wing of Pakistan. East Pakistan has always been prevalently rural and has even today only four towns with a population of more than 50,000. The largest of these is Dacca, the new capital of East Bengal, with a population of 273,000 in 1951, exclusive of the northern suburb of Tajgaon with 159,000.

Dacca is located on the relatively high northern bank of the river Buriganga, about eight miles above its confluence with the Dhaleswari and the nearby river town of Narayanganj, the port for Dacca and the chief port of the delta. (Fig. 1).

Narayanganj is located at the confluence of the rivers Dhaleswari and Lakhya and is only about fifteen miles above the focal point of the confluence of the Meghna and Ganges-Brahmaputra, thus commanding the river system of East Bengal. It is an extremely busy port where paddle-steamers, jute barges, and river launches, as well as countless country craft carrying salt, rice, or pottery, load and unload day and night. Moreover, Narayanganj is a terminal on the East Bengal meter gauge railway system which branches out from Dacca toward North Bengal, Assam, and the seaport of Chittagong to the south.

Statisticians of East Pakistan include besides urban Tajgaon also Narayanganj with its population of nearly 100,000 in what they term "Greater Dacca" (401,000 in 1951). From a geographical point of view this annexation is not yet justified, since there are at least five miles of pure rural area — deep-water paddy land — between

¹⁾ I am very grateful to Mr. and Mrs. *John Aird* who have corrected and improved my English.

the suburbs of the two towns. However, even if these low and summer-flooded lands are expensive to urbanize, Dacca's sudden post-partition expansion, and the growth of industrial, administrative, and residential properties in Dacca and Narayanganj will undoubtedly, in the not too distant future, contribute to their growing together and uniting, just as happened with their European counterpart, Athens-Piraeus. (Fig. 2).

This is not the first time in its history that Dacca has experienced greatness and prosperity as capital of the delta lands. The town's origins are lost in obscurity. Its golden age in the seventeenth century began in 1608 when it was made the seat of the viceroys and the provincial governments of the Great Moghuls. As the town flourished and expanded the riverfront became a nearly continuous succession of magnificent buildings, of which the neglected ruins of some can be seen even today. Few mosques date back to the Moghul period; of the several hundred mosques and neglected Hindu temples which today are found all through the town, only a few are older than a hundred years. Sharp decline followed when in 1706 the seat of the Moghul viceroy was transferred to Murshidabad in West Bengal for purposes of greater safety from Magh pirates and raiders.

The first Europeans in Dacca were Portuguese who founded a mission in 1612. Later came the Dutch, French, and about 1660 the British, all of whom established factories near the waterfront. They were followed in the eighteenth century by Armenians and Greeks who originally traded in salt, betel nuts, and cloth and later, after 1850, laid the foundations of the modern jute trade.

Step by step the European invasion brought new progress to Dacca, the most important changes dating from 1765 when British rule was established. The British, however, selected as their main base in Bengal some villages on the Hooghly River, present-day Calcutta, thereby leaving Dacca in the shadow as a secondary post, and permitting it only short-lived glory from 1906—11, when it was made capital of the newly created province of East Bengal and Assam. The division of Bengal gave to the Muslims in Dacca and the rest of the province an influence and power they had never before experienced under British reign. This led to strong opposition from the Hindus who engaged in repeated riots and sabotage of British installations. Consequently, in 1911 the division of Bengal was annulled and as compensation the Muslims were promised a university in Dacca.

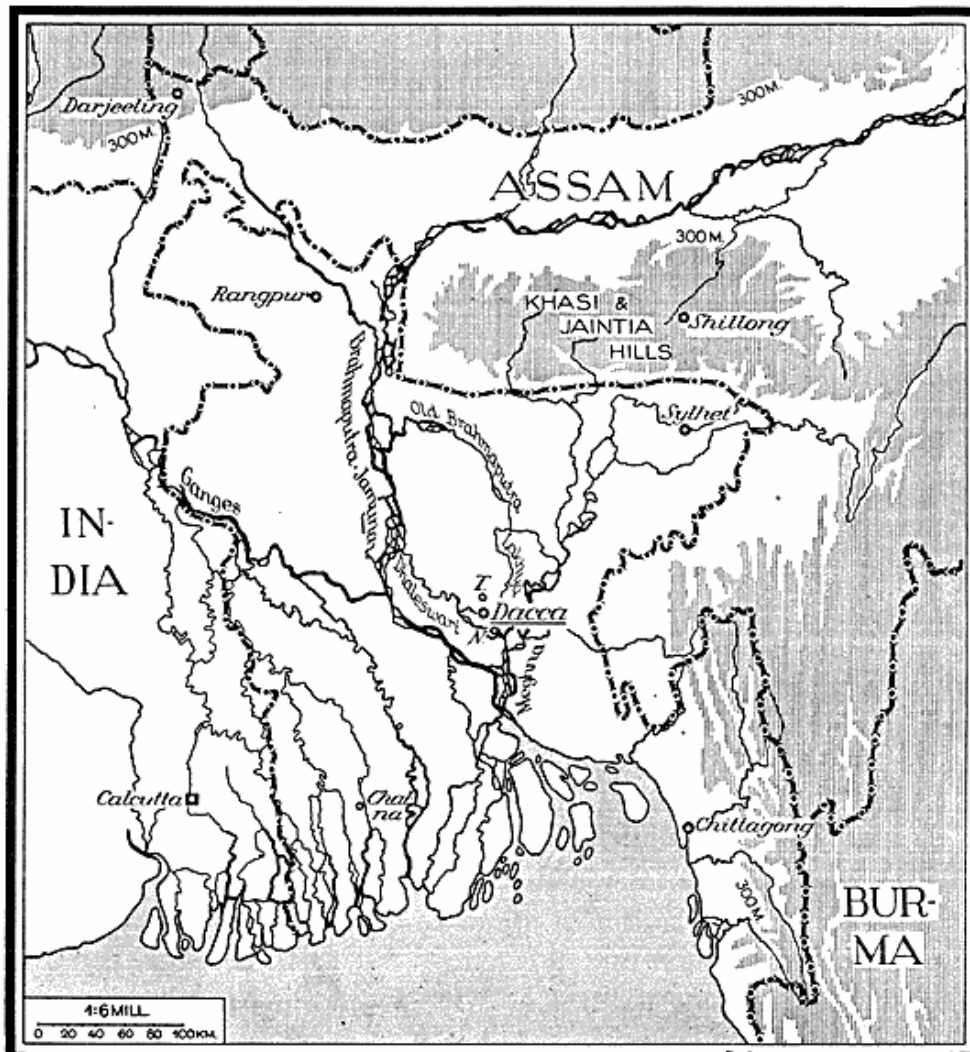


Fig. 1. Map of East Pakistan and the Ganges-Brahmaputra-delta, showing the location of Dacca. Scale: 1:6,000,000.

T. and N. corresponds to the towns: Tajgaon and Narayanganj.

In 1922 the University of Dacca was founded, taking over nearly all the splendid buildings which had been erected from 1906—11 in the Ramna suburb of Dacca as administrative and living quarters for government officers of the illfated province of East Bengal and Assam. (Fig. 5).

Ramna is still the most modern section of Dacca and has experienced a vigorous development since the partition of 1947 when Dacca again became capital of East Bengal. The new master plan for future expansion of Dacca is mainly concerned with Ramna, where many new buildings are already erected or under construction. In

Ramna, which has the character of an open residential area centered around the "Maidan", or former race course, are located the University, the Government Buildings or Secretariat (Fig. 10), the club, and the new hotel scheduled to be finished in 1953. This will be the first hotel of Western standards in all of East Pakistan. Not far from the hotel are the club and the Circuit House, a small Government-owned hotel for the accommodation of officials and semi-officials travelling on job circuit. Although the finest residential area in Dacca is located between the Circuit House and the club, in recent years modern bungalows and two- and three-story residences have shot up in formerly unbuilt areas north and east of Circuit House, e. g., the Ispahani buildings.

A modern but second-rate residential area is developing in the suburb of Azimpur, west of the railroad, where in 1952 and 1953 blocks of large, white three-story buildings have converted green paddy fields into a densely populated town inhabited by small businessmen, clerks, professors, and others corresponding to a Western middle class (Fig. 6). A new modern market, a far cry from the old, congested disease site in which are housed the markets of Dacca proper, has recently been built in the northern part of Azimpur, near the New Cantonment of British times.

The poorest suburbs of Dacca are in the northwest, between the Moghul Fort known as Lalbagh (i. e., „Red Fort“) and Enayetganj,¹⁾ and in the southeast along the Buriganga and expanding out along the railroad and the main road to Narayanganj. These suburbs continue the natural growth of the old Dacca which was primarily a riverside settlement. The striking fact of Dacca's location, clearly evident from a map (Fig. 3), is its absolute restriction to the northern banks of the Buriganga, the explanation for this being that the lowlands south of the river are exposed to floods during the monsoon. Today villages south of the Buriganga are as primitive as any to be found in East Bengal, only very slightly influenced by the life of the nearby capital. Nevertheless, some of the wholesale markets of Dacca have established themselves on the southern bank, where they enjoy cheap land rates and easy accessibility to the old heart of Moghul Dacca, the market called Chauk. Most important among the wholesale markets on the south bank is the wood market, specializing in woods for fuel. Boat ferries connect this market with the north bank road to Chauk.

The earliest Dacca was a predominantly Hindu town situated

¹⁾ "Ganj" is a common suffix in Bengal meaning "market place".

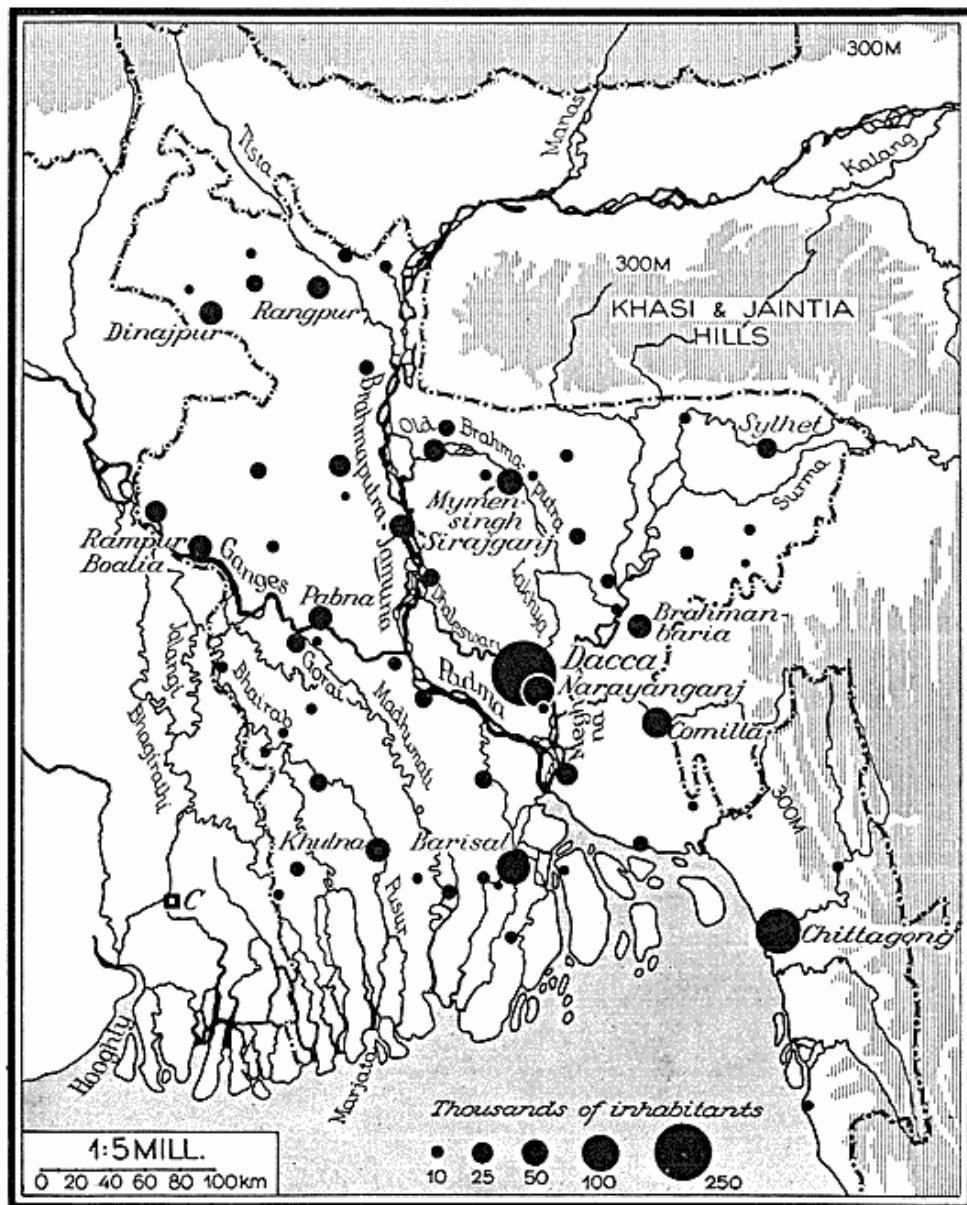


Fig. 2. Map of the towns of East Pakistan (1951). Scale: 1:5,000,000.

between the Buriganga and the Dulai Khal Canal. The latter was excavated in early Moghul times, emanating from the brook of the same name in such a way that the lower course of the brook and the canal together enclosed the old town, thereby affording it both protection and an excellent inland water channel. Water transportation is nevertheless possible only during the monsoon period from June to November, when there is a channel depth varying from five to ten feet. During the winter and spring this waterway dwind-

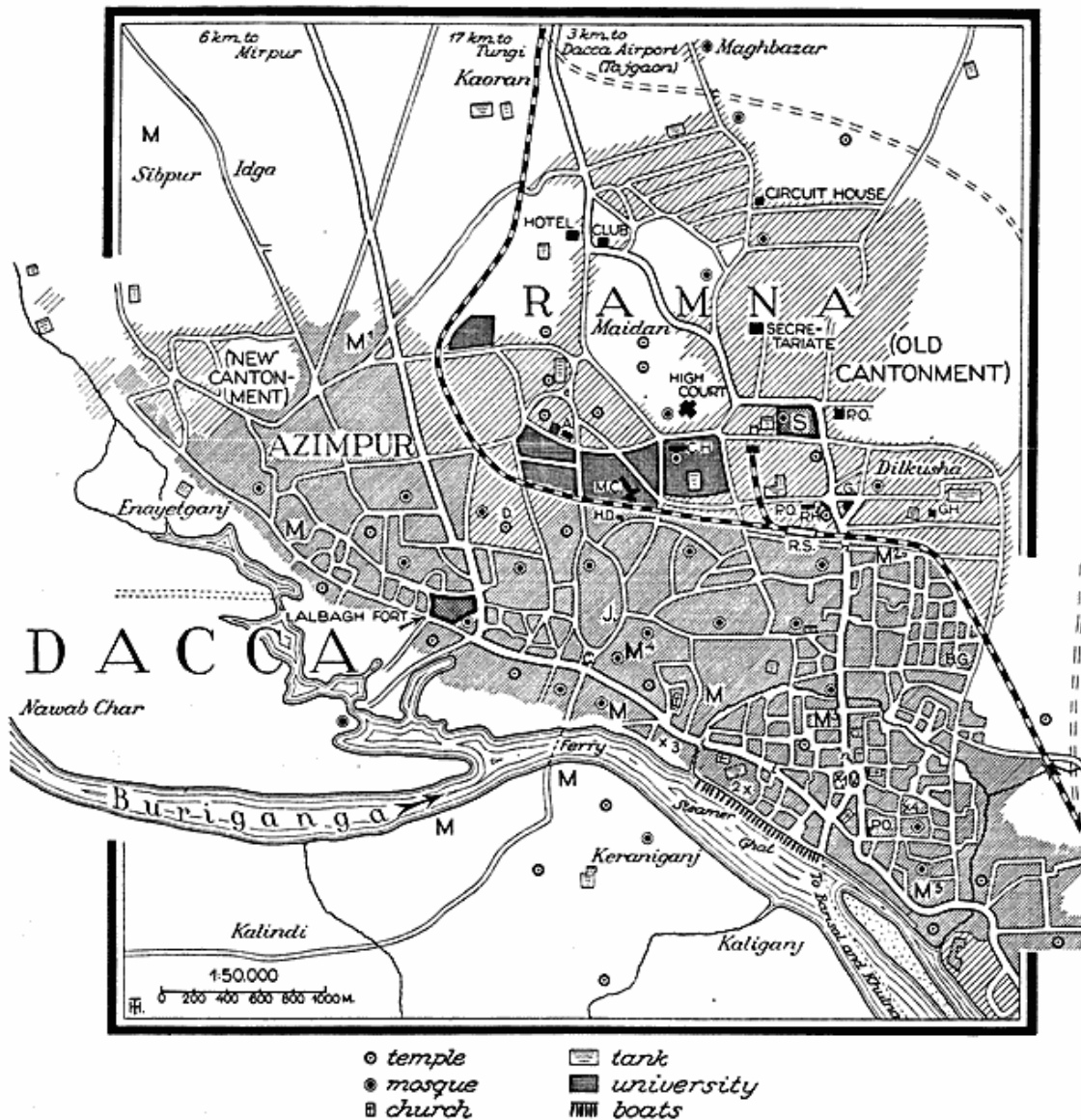


Fig. 3. Map of Dacca. Scale: 1:50,000.

The more densely populated bazars or districts are the darker areas. The planned removal of the railway and the station is shown by the double-dashed line (= =). The present level crossing at Nawabpur Road is a serious obstacle to traffic on the town's main thoroughfare.

A — Legislative Assembly; BG — Baldha (Botanical) Garden; C — Chauk Bazar; CH — Curzon Hall (Faculty of Science of the University); D — Dhakeswari Temple (Hindu); G — Gulistan Cinema; GH — Government House; HD — Hossaini Delan, where the great Muslim festival of Mohurrum is celebrated; i-i — Islampur Road; J — Dacca Central Jail; MC — Medical College and Faculty of Arts building; n-n — Nawabpur Road; PO — Post Office; RH — Rest House, a second-rate public hotel; RS — Railway Station; S — Secretariat of the East Pakistan Government; V — Victoria Park.

M — Market, bazar; M¹ — New Market in Azimpur; M² — Thateri Bazar; M³ — Rasha Bazar; M⁴ — Moulvi Bazar; M⁵ — Shain Bazar.

x1. Pakistan State Bank (Site of the English Factory), x2. Nawab's House (Site of the French Factory), x3. Mitford Hospital (Site of the Dutch Factory), x4. Site of the Portuguese Factory.

les to a mere brook or a chain of stagnant pools, laden with garbage and other refuse, an ideal breeding ground for malarial mosquitoes until disinfection was begun by the British during the last war. Malarial prevention has since been continued by the local government.

Three of the four old European factories, the Portuguese, French, and British, were located on the Dulai Khal "Island", while the Dutch was situated just west of the three on the site occupied today by Mitford Hospital. The center of the "Island" is the main focal



Fig. 4. Buriganga and a section of the steamer ghat in Dacca. (16.11.52).

point of Dacca today, busy Victoria Park, which in spite of a stand of palms is little more than a small dusty square. Nearby are most of the churches and banks in Dacca, as well as an English and American Catholic school and the main post office.

The street system inherited from the old Dacca is a complex and irregular maze of narrow, oft-crooked, and occasionally blind streets and lanes. The main streets are normally twenty or thirty feet wide, the secondary roads often less than fifteen. No street has sidewalks, most are in poor condition, and the main thoroughfares carry, for most of the day, a packed traffic mass of pedestrians, and all kinds of vehicles: jeeps, cars, lorries, motor-cycles, hansom cabs, and countless cycle-rickshaws.

Dacca's two main arteries are Islampur Road and Nawabpur Road. Islampur runs parallel to the Buriganga on an average of a furlong from the bank. Bearing several different names, it extends from Chauk toward Victoria Park, continuing on as the road to

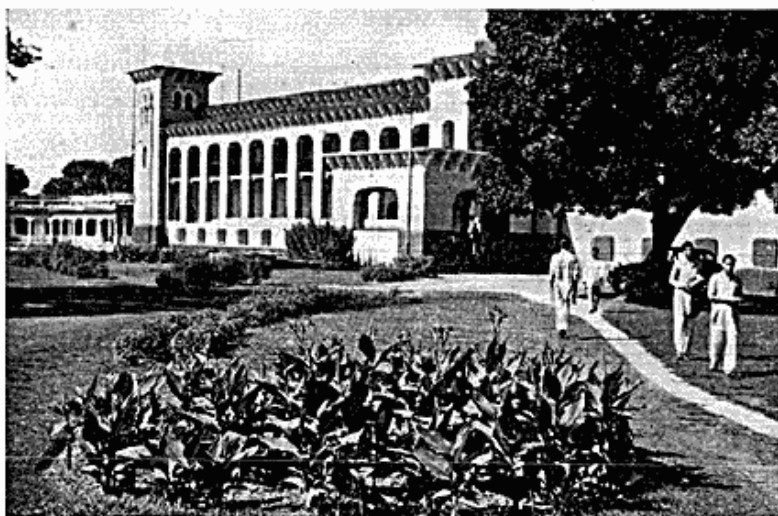


Fig. 5. The Faculty of Arts building of Dacca University. (20.11.52).



Fig. 6. New three-story buildings in the Azimpur residential area. (16.11.52).



Fig. 7. View over old Dacca from the ruins of the Moghul rest house, Bara Kutra. (16.11.52).

Fig. 8. View from the Chauk into Chauk Bazar Road, continuing into Mitford Road and Islampur Road; the old main thoroughfare of Dacca, running parallel to and close to the river. (16.11.52).

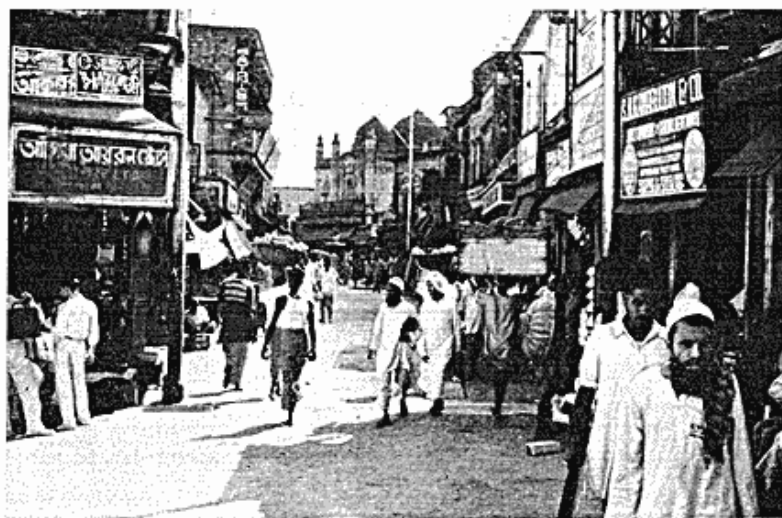


Fig. 9. The central section of Nawabpur Road, crowded with cyclo-rickshaws and pedestrians. (23.11.52).

Fig. 10. Abdul Ghani Road in the northern suburb of Ramna. To the left a few of the buildings in the Secretariat, to the right typical middle class bungalows built of bamboo poles and matting. (23.11.52).



Narayanganj. It bifurcates near Victoria Park, the northern branch being the famous "Shell Street", where until 1950 about 4000 Hindu workers, or *Sankharis*, were engaged in the conch shell cottage industry. After the riots of February 1950, thousands of Hindus left Dacca for India, among them many shell workers. Although today shell bracelets are still produced by scores of workshops, the severe restrictions on import of shells from Ceylon and Madras may bring an end to what is considered the oldest industry in Dacca. The southern branch of Islampur Road, Patuatuly, has for centuries been the home of the jewellery and the gold and silver filigree industry, a Hindu craft now on the decline in Dacca.

Islampur Road proper, from Dulai Khal to the bifurcation, is a retail shopping center concentrating on textiles and watches. Between Dulai Khal and Chauk lies a small Chinese colony, most of whom are shoemakers, but this part of the road is more largely occupied by wholesale shops trading in groceries, crockery, cutlery, etc. (Fig. 8). The square of Chauk itself is occupied by a large wholesale bazar, accommodated in dingy bamboo barracks since the burning in 1950 of the original bazar building. The wholesale shopping district continues west of Chauk toward Lalbagh Fort and for a little way toward the huge Dacca Central Jail located north of Chauk on the site of the first fort of Dacca. One of the leading wholesale trades west of Chauk is in skin and hides (cow and goat), which are often spread out on the road there.

The chief retail shopping center of Dacca is Nawabpur Road, leading north from Victoria Park across the railroad toward Ramna and carrying the bulk of the north-south traffic between that area and Victoria Park and the steamer ghat at Sadarghat.¹⁾ (Fig. 9). Like Islampur-Nawabpur was formerly dominated by Hindu shopkeepers. Since the riots of 1950 the Hindus have been a clear minority, now dominating only a few trades, among which are the pharmacies. An interesting sideline here is the cooperation with doctors who hold consultation hours in the pharmacy in return for a share in the profits from drug sales.

The Hindus who in pre-partition days numbered about 50 per cent of the population of Dacca now amount to only 15 or 20 per cent. They are still concentrated in the old Hindu bazars or town districts located chiefly east of Nawabpur Road and secondarily around Shell Street and Islampur Road.

One other important road in Dacca should be mentioned: French

1) "Ghat" is a common Bengali suffix meaning "landing place".

Road, which runs parallel to Nawabpur about a third of a mile to the west. Here in its central section are the shops of carpenters and joiners, and retail traders in bamboo, teak, sal and other woods. French Road joins Islampur near to bifurcation and near the site of the old French Factory, and a side lane joins Islampur Road further west, near the Dulai Khal crossing, and the only green spot in the old town of Dacca, the public meeting grounds of Armenitola "Park".

There are some cottage industries in central Dacca, and also soap and match factories. However, the large-scale manufacturing industries are mainly to be found in the outskirts of the urban area, e. g., toward the east where the plant of the Hardeo Glassworks is located. During the last few years new industries in rubber, leather, etc. have been founded in Tajgaon, where the future industrial development of Dacca is scheduled to be concentrated.

Another industrial center is being developed on the Lakhya River north of Narayanganj. This area which is now receiving a new road connection with Dacca already includes several large cotton spinning and weaving mills, and this is the location of the world's largest jute plant, the Adamjee Jute Mills, an impressive new competitor for the Calcutta jute industry. It is built in three sections, of which the first two are already in operation, with the third expected to go into production in 1954.

There is no doubt that the textile industries, already of major importance in "Greater Dacca", will become even more a leading industry. This may be of consolation to those who regret the decline of the famed old art of Dacca, the fabrication of Dacca Muslins made of indigenous cotton, transparent, and unrivaled in texture and beauty of design, for centuries in great demand over all of India. Lancashire competition wiped out this fine Hindu handicraft in the early part of the nineteenth century, and there are no longer weavers or *tantis* in Dacca able to produce the fine muslins of the old days. Dacca is now manufacturing jute bags and hessian and cheap cotton cloth instead of the *abirawan* ("running water") and the *shabnam* ("evening dew") of the glorious Moghul era.

Even a brief description of Dacca would be incomplete without reference to the means of public conveyance. There are no street-cars; a town bus service is operated, but the buses are old, dilapidated, and inevitably loaded far over capacity. Most important are the cycle-rickshaws to carry two passengers, which can be hired all through town (Fig. 9) followed by the twoseated horse-drawn

gharries and a few taxis, chiefly up-to-date American cars, which are very expensive.

Dacca has an airport located at Tajgaon to the north of town, from which there is direct connection to Karachi, Lahore, and Rangoon, and to Jessore and Chittagong in East Bengal. Of much more importance are the combined rail and river steamer communications. The main connections from Dacca are to Chittagong, Sylhet, North Bengal (Rangpur-Darjeeling), and via Narayanganj by steamer to Goalundo on the Ganges at the confluence of the Meghna and Ganges-Brahmaputra, then by rail to Calcutta or Khulna 15 miles north of the new jute port at Chalna. Also from Dacca Ghat there is a direct steamer service to Barisal in the Sunderban area.

The road network is a critical problem not only in Dacca but in the whole of the province as well. There is no road connection from Dacca to any other district town, and it is impossible to go by car more than about fifteen miles in any direction from the city. The future development of Dacca must depend in large measure on the extension of the East Bengal road network. The difficulties are overwhelming in this land of rivers and floods, where nearly every road must be constructed on embankments, not only an extremely expensive process, but also a serious obstruction to the natural overflow irrigation of paddy and jute lands. The beginnings of a better road system are now under construction and when finished this will contribute a great deal to the future prosperity of Dacca, at the same time providing it easy contact with the forty-three million people for whom it is now both capital and administrative center.
