# Salt Lake Archives

**A Report** 



27/D, DD Block, Sector-I, Salt Lake City, Kolkata-700064

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A Report

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# **Institute of Development Studies Kolkata**

27/D, DD Block, Sector-I, Salt Lake City, Kolkata-700064

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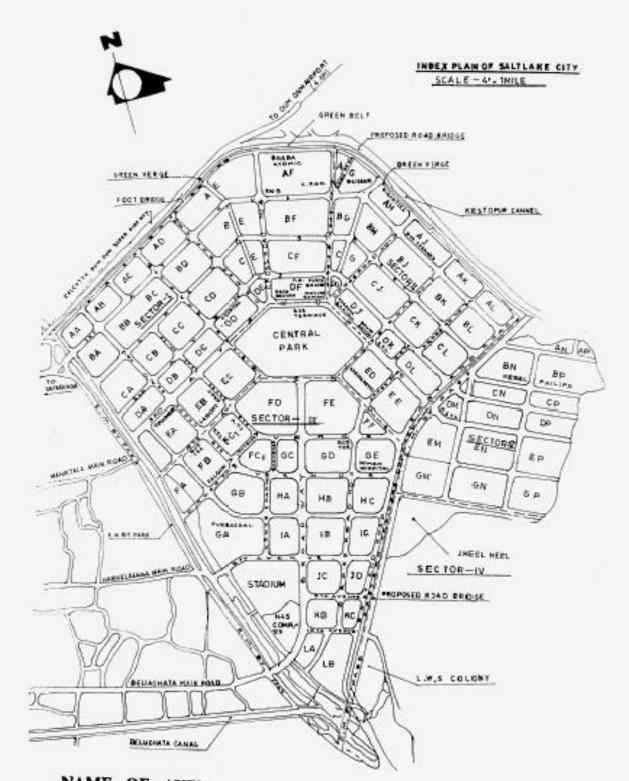
Syamantak Chattopadhyay



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# NAME OF AVENUES & ROADS OF SALT LAKE CITY

Courtesy: General Information Directory, Laban Hrad Sangbad, 1987.

### 1. Salt Lake: A Brief History

Salt Lake, also known as Bidhan Nagar, developed as a township in the eastern fringe of Kolkata through reclamation of parts of the vast marshlands. The plan was executed during the chief ministership of Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy and hence the township was named as Bidhan Nagar. Salt Lake, or Salt Water Lake, was a colonial coinage to describe the marshes bordering Kolkata on the east.

The plans of reclaiming Salt Water Lakes to expand Calcutta can be traced back to the colonial period. In 1830, when William Bentinck was the Governor-General of India, reclamation plans of the Salt Water Lakes were discussed in the government circles. In 1865, the colonial government examined a proposal tabled by 'Salt Water Lakes Reclamation and Irrigation Company Ltd'. In 1882-83, once again, the possibility of reclaiming Salt Lake was discussed. The question of reclaiming Salt Water Lakes was routinely discussed in official circles in early 20<sup>a</sup> century as well. However, due to the



Photo 1.1: Courtesy: Salt Lake Archives, IDSK huge expenditure, no concrete action was taken.

With independence and partition, Kolkata witnessed massive refugee influx and unprecedented housing crisis. In this context, Dr. B.C. Roy revived the plans of reclaiming the marshes bordering Calcutta. He invited Netherlands Engineering Consultants (NEDECO) to explore the possibilities of reclaiming Salt Water Lakes. On January 1953, NEDECO submitted its detailed report and following that a global tender was called to carry out the reclamation scheme of Salt Lake (1959). A Firm from Yugoslavia, named Messrs. Invest Import, was appointed for the task. On April 16, 1962, few months before his

death, the reclamation project was inaugurated by B.C Roy.

Salt Lake was initially conceived as a residential locality for middle class professionals. The first few houses came up in 1970-71. 2021 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> year of the township as a place of residence. Apart from being a residential area, Salt Lake has emerged as an office space (both IT Hub and government offices), an entertainment hub (shopping mall, amusement parks etc.), prime centre of education, key centre of provincial governance and a political power

centre where many important provincial leaders stay. In many ways the Salt Lake experiments were followed when the marsh wetlands of eastern Kolkata were further reclaimed to establish New Town –Rajarhat urban settlements. The significance of Salt Lake in the urban studies and in the postcolonial history of West Bengal has encouraged us to initiate the building of an archive of Salt Lake at the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata.



Photo 1.2: An aerial view of Salt Lake (Source: Internet)

### 2. Why archive Salt Lake?



building cities in 'greenfield sites' became synonymous with modernist development. Cities like Salt Lake, like Chandigarh, attracted foreign experts and funding and emerged as of modern symbols development. This is a moment that requires rigorous scholarly intervention and here Salt Lake can be an important case study.

Photo 2.1: Karunamoyee Housing (Courtesy:Saradindu Choudhury)

Overshadowed by Kolkata, Salt Lake remains almost entirely absent in academic research. The historians of the cities of the Global South have largely focused on colonial urbanism.

For the urban geographers, sociologists and anthropologists, the contemporary smart towns have been the main draw. Salt Lake, conceived and developed in the early postcolonial era, has remained invisible to both groups. It is in many ways similar to the Nehruvian modernist cities like Chandigarh. The 1950s and '60s was a very significant moment in the history of urban development in the Global South when In the last 50 years Salt Lake has gained locational, administrative and political importance. Built by reclaiming a portion of East Kolkata Wetlands, on which thousands had depended for their livelihood and which

had been crucial to the sewerage network of Kolkata, Salt Lake is an important site for studying political ecology, wetland environmental management and consequences of urbanization. There has hardly been any systematic scholarly work on Salt Lake focusing on any of these aspects. The archive will be central source material for any such kind of exploration. The newspapers, oral interviews. photographs and other collected items

provide rich material on Salt Lake's politics, culture, history, society and ecology. Along with the local histories, they are therefore of great importance for any scholarly work.

In terms of community life too Salt Lake is at the cusp of a potential transformation in its residence and demographic pattern. With it will be of great cultural significance to the diasporic and resident community. Organising and cataloguing these is essential for preserving and making them accessible to the local community and researchers. Archiving Salt Lake then is important for preserving local history and making it

Photo 2.2: Namaz at Central Park (Courtesy: Saradindu Choudhury)



a very high proportion of elderly population (Census 2011) with expatriate children, the local history of Salt Lake so far precariously preserved in amateur personal collections is in danger of disappearing altogether. The digitising and open access of these materials will make available elements of their history to the scattered local community. Therefore, available for the community and scholarship alike.

# 3. Condition of material—why is archiving necessary?

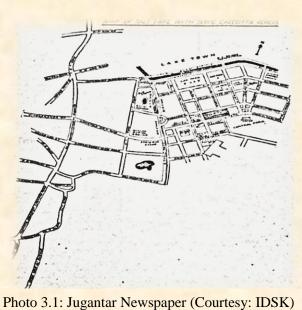
Understudied in urban scholarship, Salt Lake has not been systematically documented. Several local newspapers, invaluable as sources of information, have been published at various points of time from Salt Lake. But these remain scattered,

personal

collections of and proprietors subscribers who lack the space, expertise and fund to preserve them in professional conditions. Preserved as physical copies, the newspapers are in the of being danger

in

stored



The souvenirs, directories and such other material are similarly stored in people's personal collections, block association offices and sometimes in the offices of housing associations of Salt Lake. Because they are scattered in various locations and stored in

fragile set-ups of individuals, they are at risk of damage, destruction and getting misplaced.

> Local histories of places are also documented through people's narratives. With a rapidly ageing population, these stories of Salt Lake too are in imminent danger of being lost to the posterity because of old age, frail health

damaged and/or lo: Photo 3.1: Jugantar Ne Some newspapers and documents are preserved in local libraries. These local libraries are under-staffed and barely functional because of inadequate funds and few readers. With these libraries falling into disrepair through water damage, termite attack, lack of staff and general neglect, the newspapers, like other materials still housed there, will be destroyed in the near future.

and fragile memories of the early residents who are invaluable sources of information.

Researching and writing about Salt Lake is not possible without these primary source materials. And it is this precarity of the material storage and their lack of availability to the public both general and academic that makes the project of archiving Salt Lake an important one.

### 4. Our Collection So Far

In 2021, IDSK started the initiative of archiving Salt Lake. It was to commemorate 50 years of the township and 20 years of the institute in 2022. The process began by tracing the origin of Salt Lake in old books, archival records, assembly debates and the census data. At first, the work was mostly restricted to locating published material due to the Covid pandemic. In between August 2021 and January 2022, the team conducted several interviews (both online and offline).

The initial plan was to conduct interviews



Photo 4.1: Newspapers at IDSK library. (Courtesy: Salt Lake Archives, IDSK)

with early residents of Salt Lake in order to understand their lived experiences and also make sense of the changes which the township went through over the years. What was living in Salt Lake like, 30-40 years ago? How did it evolve as a space? The senior residents narrated the stories of jackals, howling in the night sky; mosquitoes infesting entire houses, and even sandstorms as part of their everyday lives. At the same time, they told us about patterns of interactions and associations that shaped their social lives around 1970s and 80s. How did a sense of community emerge? Who were labeled as 'outsiders'? What roles did certain religious/cultural festivals. political events and emergencies played in forging a sense of community? These questions became important in various interviews.

Apart from rich, long interviews, our other important find has been some of the newspapers published from Salt Lake. We are grateful to Mr. Bidhan Ganguly, editor of a local fortnightly newspaper called *Susambad*, for allowing us to access his personal collection. We have acquired 116 editions of the paper (from 2009-2014) with the goal of digitization. Apart from *Susambad*, there are other dailies and fortnightly papers of Salt Lake without any proper archive. We, therefore, began tracing other editors of local papers and continued with the process of preservation. We managed to acquire a few editions of *Labanhrad Sambad* and *Salt Lake Post*. Apart from newspapers, IDSK now has a collection of old books, souvenirs, photographs, legal documents and other materials related to Salt Lake.

At present, we are conducting more interviews – with particular focus on the informal sector, housing residents, minority population among others. We are also in search of other newspapers, souvenirs, photographs, relevant documents

### সল্টলেকে সবাই অমর

জানেন, আজকাল তুতেন খামেন সন্টলেকেই থাকেন।

এক হাতে থলে, এক হাতে তরবার মহাবীর আলেকজান্দার সন্টলেকেই করেন বাজার।

অবসর প্রাপ্ত হারুন-অল-রসিদ শোনা যাচ্ছে, গাঁথা হচ্ছে তারো বাড়ির ভিত, তিন মাসের মধ্যে গৃহপ্রবেশ নিশ্চিত।

সেদিন পূর্বাচল মিনিবাসে 'এই যে আকবর' সঙ্গে সঙ্গে 'অশোকদা যে, কি খবর?' সন্টলেকে সবাই অমর।

Photo 4.3: A verse by Tarapada Roy from his book titled *Bhalo Accho Garib Manush* (2001)

"I Fra Ingars II



Photo 4.2: Newspapers stored at Labanhrad Sambad office. (Courtesy: Salt Lake Archives, IDSK)



Photo 4.4: The front page of Susambad

### Newspapers:

| S | L | Newspaper            | Coverage  | Volume & Issues | Туре        | Total  | No of |
|---|---|----------------------|-----------|-----------------|-------------|--------|-------|
|   |   |                      |           |                 |             | Issues | pages |
|   | 1 | Susambad             | 2009-2014 | 5(17)- 12(24)   | Fortnightly | 106    | 1362  |
|   | 2 | Laban Hrad<br>Sambad | 2010-2021 | 21(6)- 32(19)   | Fortnightly | 35     | 1798  |
|   | 3 | Salt Lake Post       | 2003-2003 | 12(4)-12(6)     | Fortnightly | 3      | 36    |

**Interviews:** We have interviewed 30 people from different sectors of Salt Lake City. Here is the list of interviewees and related information-

| SL | Name of the interviewee         | Occupation           |
|----|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1  | Alakendu Ghosh                  | Doctor               |
| 2  | Ananya Chatterjee               | Professor            |
| 3  | Aparesh Chowdhury               | Engineer             |
| 4  | Arunabha Majumdar               | Engineer             |
| 5  | Arup Dey                        | Editor               |
| 6  | Ayan Chatterjee                 | Activist             |
| 7  | Basudeb Burman                  | Professor (Retired.) |
| 8  | Bidhan Ganguly                  | Editor               |
| 9  | Bijoy Padhi                     | Editor (Assistant)   |
| 10 | Debajyoti Bhattacharya          | Writer               |
| 11 | Indrani Chakraborty             | Professor            |
| 12 | Mahasweta Bhattacharya          | Research Scholar     |
| 13 | Md Salauddin Mollah, Masud Alam | Aspiring Teacher     |
| 14 | Nandini Ghosh                   | Professor            |

| 15 | Nidhikant Singh                       | Carpenter   |
|----|---------------------------------------|---|
| 16 | Nilanjan Sengupta                     | Social worker                                     |
| 17 | Ranajoy Banerjee                      | Research Scholar                                  |
| 18 | Ranjan Bhattacharya                   | Architect   |
| 19 | Saikat Mukhopadhyay                   | Teacher   |
| 20 | Saradindu Choudhury                   | Photo-Journalist                                  |
| 21 | Shyamapada Das and Nidhikant<br>Singh | Rickshaw-Puller/ Carpenter                        |
| 22 | Sibaji Pratim Basu                    | Vice Chancellor                                   |
| 23 | Somesh Chandra Chatterjee             | Assistant Commissioner of<br>Income Tax (Retired) |
| 24 | Sucheta Chakraborty                   | Journalist  |
| 25 | Sukanta Chowdhury                     | Professor   |
| 26 | Sukumar Basak                         | Businessman                                       |
| 27 | Swagata Dasgupta                      | Teacher   |
| 28 | Trina Haldar                          | Aspiring Teacher                                  |
| 29 | Tulsi Sinha Roy                       | Councillor  |
| 30 | Shibu Ghosh                           | Caretaker   |

### **Photograph** (s):

Mr. Saradindu Choudhury, a senior journalist of Telegraph has donated more than 3000 digital photographs from his personal collection. Moreover, our team has also collected 100+ digital photographs from interviewees' personal collection.

#### **Online Sources:**

- i. Salt Lake: A Living History (Online Magazine)- http://saltlakealivinghistory.com/
- ii. Facebook Page of Salt Lake: A Living Historyhttps://www.facebook.com/saltlakealivinghistory/

- iii. Instagram handle of Salt Lake Archives: https://www.instagram.com/saltlakearchives/
- iv. Salt Lake City (Blog): https://anilcm.wordpress.com/kolkata/salt-lake-city/
- v. Kolkata First (How Salt Lake was born): <u>https://www.kolkatafirst.in/?p=7797</u>
- vi. East Kolkata Waste Management Authority: <u>http://ekwma.in/ek/about-us/history-</u> chronology/
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- viii. Times of India (Archives): https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/salt-lake



Photo 4.5: Old Bidhannagar Municipality Building (Courtesy: IDSK)

"In 1978, when we shifted to BD block, there were only about 15-20 houses in the whole area... Also, there were only two markets in Salt Lake, BD and CA... Because of the spaced out nature of this place, to get children or to get people to talk on a regular basis was very difficult... After sunset, there wouldn't be anything, everything would stop. So whether it was a howl of a jackal or a dog barking or even a frog croaking , every sound would get aggravated ...."

**Nandini Ghosh** 

**Assistant Professor, IDSK** 

"When I was young, I used to come with my father to see the landfilling process of Salt Lake. We would take a bus from College Street to Bengal Chemical. From there, we had to walk past a canal (somewhere near Duttabad)... I clearly remember seeing a boosting and pumping station located near the Vidyasagar Housing Complex (at present). It would accelerate the pumping process and people would often gather around the station. The sand and water was also accompanied by fish, dead animals and even gold coins... We were the fifth resident of entire Salt Lake... So we can perhaps claim to be a part of Salt Lake's history!"

> Aparesh Chowdhury Engineer



Photo 4.6: *Bhit pujo* in Salt Lake Year 1990 (Courtesy: Shurjo Roy)



### **5. Future Plans**

- i. Continue the process of interviewing old residents and also explore different spaces of marginality within the township.
- ii. Also collect other relevant materials like newspapers, documents, photographs, etc. related to Salt Lake.

Photo 5.1: Durga Pujo, FD Block (Courtsey: Saradindu Choudhury)

- iii. Initiate the process of digitization of already collected materials.
- Apply for grants and also seek other financial assistance to continue the process of archiving.
- v. Organize an exhibition to introduce Salt Lake Archives.
- vi. Open Salt Lake Archives formally for public access.

Photo 5.2: Salt Lake *Bhit Pujo*. Year: 1990 (Courtesy: Shurjo Roy)



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- 44. লবন হ্রদের ইতিকথা সুশীল কুমার রায়চৌধুরী, সুজন পাবলিকেশন, কলকাতা, ১৯৮৭, পৃ: ১৭৪।
- 45. বিধবা বিবাহ ও সমাজ সংস্কার আন্দোলনে ২৪ পরগণার মহিষবাথান গ্রাম ও স্বাধীনতা সংগ্রামী লক্ষ্মীকান্ত প্রামাণিক- সুধন্য কুমার মন্ডল, ইতিহাস অনুসন্ধান-১৮, অনুরুদ্ধ রায় (সম্পাদক), ২০০৪, পৃ: ৩৪৪-৩৫২।
- 46. রাজারহাটে আইন অমান্য, বিপ্লববাদ ও বামপন্থী চিন্তাধারা (১৯৩০-১৯৪০)- পুষ্পরঞ্জন সরকার, ইতিহাস অনুসন্ধান-১৮, অনুরুদ্ধ রায় (সম্পাদক), ২০০৪, প: ৩৫৩-৩৫৬।
- 47. বিধাননগর/ বিশ্বনগর- শিবাজীপ্রতিম বসু, বারোমাস, শারদীয় সংখ্যা, ২০০৫, পু: ২৬৭- ২৭৩।
- 48. কলকাতায় মহিষবাথানের (চব্বিশ পরগণা) লবণ সত্যাগ্রহের প্রভাব- পুষ্পরঞ্জন সরকার, *ইতিহাস অনুসন্ধান-২০*, অনুরুদ্ধ রায় (সম্পাদক), ২০০৬, পৃ:৩১৩- ৩১৬।
- 49. লবন হ্রদ কথা স্বপন কুমার ঘোষ এবং অজয় দত্ত, চন্দ্রকেতুগড় থেকে দমদম, কলকাতা, ২০১৮, পৃ: ৭৯-৯১।
- 50. লবণ-হ্রদ প্রকল্প ও পশ্চিমবঙ্গের রূপকার ডাঃ বিধানচন্দ্র রায় সুধীর দে
- 51. বিধাননগর পরিকল্পনা তেজোময় চক্রবর্তী, লবন-হুদ সংবাদ, ২৮ মার্চ, ১৯৯০
- 52. স্মারক গ্রন্থ- বিধাননগর (সল্টলেক) ওয়েলফেয়ার অ্যাসোসিয়েশন, বিধাননগরের ৩৮ তম প্রতিষ্ঠা দিবস উপলক্ষে প্রকাশিত, ১৬ এপ্রিল, ২০০০
- 53. উড়ো খই- বিমল কর, দ্বিতীয় খন্ড, আনন্দ পাবলিশার্স, কলকাতা, ১৯৯৪, ISBN-817215285X, পৃ: ১৮০-২০২।



Photo 6.1: Salt Lake Stadium (Courtsey: Saradindu Choudhury)



Photo 6.2: Central Park (Courtsey: Saradindu Choudhury)

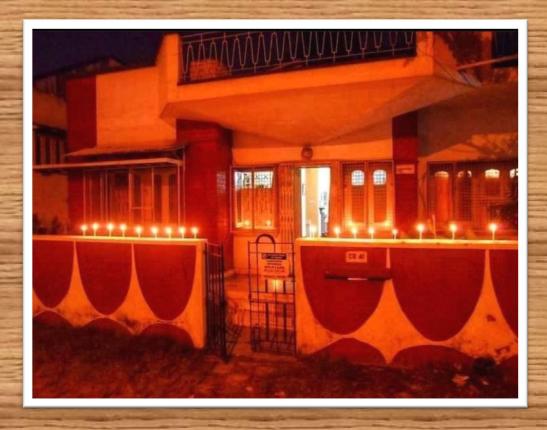


Photo 6.3: Anandadhara (CB-41, Salt Lake), one of the earliest residences of Bidhannagar. (Courtesy: Sudeshna M Ray)



Photo 6.4: The Main Thoroughfare (Courtesy: Salt Lake Archives, IDSK)



Photo 6.5: Protests near Karunamoyee (Courtsey: Saradindu Choudhury)

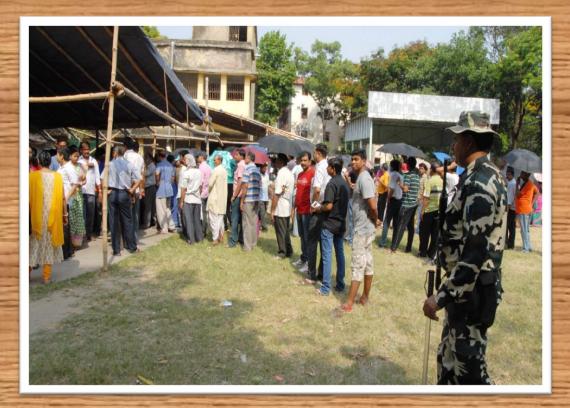


Photo 6.6: Elections in Salt Lake. (Courtsey: Saradindu Choudhury)

