

## GHOST TOWNS OF BENGAL

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### ABSTRACT

The history of urban development in Asansol can be traced to roughly 1836 AD, when Asansol was well-linked to Kolkata with the extension of the Grand Trunk Road (G.T. Road) further towards Delhi enroute Asansol. In 1863 when the East India Railways extended from Raniganj to Asansol, *railway colony* by the name of 'European Colony' came up, with close to 85 percent Anglo-Indian residents. Finally, in 1885, the regional division of East Indian Railway Company shifted from Raniganj to Asansol, thus, setting the core for urbanisation in the settlement, and in 1906 Asansol was established as a Sub-division for administration. Since then, there have been series of phases of industrial and infrastructural project expansion that provided impetus to the growth of urban settlements in the region. Since early twentieth century the western fringes of Bengal that border the Chota Nagpur plateau has been characterised by the growth of urban settlements and cities surrounding railway divisional offices, coal mines, heavy manufacturing industries and administrative headquarters; medium-sized towns, notified towns, steel townships, Census Towns, municipal towns, district headquarters, and million-plus cities gradually emerged in the decades following 1990s. However, these were also the decades when the initial spurt of industrial performance had begun falling due to varied factors. There were shifts in the dominance of the sectors of economy, demography and urban morphology, as industrial sickness set-in, with the governments trying to save the sick industries in the 1990s by aligning them with small-scale industries. Urbanisation was still on the rise owing to several attributes of settlement functions. Growth of new towns of diverse size-class classification can be observed in the industrial-urban corridor of Asansol-Durgapur since 1980s and the region witnessed growth of Census Towns from 2001 to 2011; however, along with an increase in number of towns in the region, visuals of 'deserted town' also surfaced in the industrial area; some of the towns also registered drop in population. The Asansol-Durgapur industrial-urban corridor of West Bengal, also the oldest coal mining region of India, has recorded significant urban growth and infrastructure development over the last two decades. The emergence of new settlements in the region as well as the struggles of some of the industrial townships and mining towns for economic sustenance, cultural restoration, urban planning and facilitation of civic amenities, that subsequently pave the path towards 'abandoned settlements' or 'vanishing towns' in the region make for an interesting study. The research paper attempts to understand the underlying processes that go into the making of 'ghost towns', with focus on the industrial-urban region of Asansol-Durgapur in West Bengal. The industrial units and collieries serve as sites of growing Census Towns, but also at times present grim pictures of abandoned settlements. This study on industrial townships and mining towns is aimed at acquiring a comprehensive account of the factors operational in the local geography that contribute to the urban dynamics of 'making of settlements' and why at times the 'once thriving' settlement becomes a 'ghost town'.