

Paper Proposal for the Conference "Company Towns of the Bat'a Concern", March 2011:

"Bat'a Comes to Bengal: Building a Czech Company Town in Late Colonial India"

Ian Petrie
University of Pennsylvania

This paper will offer a case study of Bat'a's expansion to India and its construction, beginning in 1934, of a model company town in Bengal at Batanagar (lit. 'Bata town'), near Calcutta. Within the history of the firm, its operations in India offer an especially interesting, and ultimately problematic, history. The aspirations for India and Indians embodied in Batanagar constituted little less than a 'civilizing mission' directed at both workers and consumers. Company lore immediately mythologized the founder's pioneering visit to the subcontinent and his humanitarian motives for promoting shoes for the impoverished masses, whereby the retailing of Bata's wares constituted a modest project of uplift on a massive scale. Simultaneously, Batanagar was to signal a revolution in labor practices, from the mode of recruitment, to job training, and the housing, education and recreation of the workers and their families.

The construction and working life of Batanagar will be considered first in the context of Bata's global operations and its prior history of urban and industrial development – at Zlin and elsewhere in Europe, notably Borovo in Yugoslavia. Yet the particular history of this model town – both the hopes invested in it and the conflicts occasioned by it (including a history of significant labor disputes as long as that of the town itself) – can only be fully understood by contextualizing it within the history of twentieth-century Bengal. Thus this paper will locate Bengali and other Indian perceptions of Batanagar within larger debates over economic and social development in the province during the late colonial decades and interpret Batanagar's first two decades in the context of the tumultuous local history of anti-colonial nationalism, communalism (Hindu-Muslim conflict) and labor politics.