



(L) Spectacular Vista: A very rare and fascinating lantern slide taken by Fritz Kapp of his photo-studio in Darjeeling, with the snow capped Himalayas as the backdrop, 1888. Courtesy: Hugh Raynor, UK (M) Rangamati River View, Chittagong Hill Tracts, 1907. Photo : Fritz Kapp, Dhaka (R) The Chakma Chief, Raja Bhuban Mohan Roy (1876-1939), of Rangamati, Chittagong Hill Tracts, flanked by two kinsmen from the Mong tribe, 1909, Photo: Fritz Kapp, Dhaka Courtesy: Raja Devasish Roy

# A photographer named Fritz Kapp

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It was in the early 1980s, that I became aware of Frederick Fritz Kapp popularly known as Fritz Kapp, a German photographer through his photographs printed in a book published from Calcutta. The few photographs in the book, were of poor print quality. Nevertheless, the unfamiliar foreign name piqued me. Who was this photographer named Fritz Kapp? And, what was he doing in Dhaka in the early 20th century during the British Raj? I was determined to find out more about him.

As time went by, I started to compile 'cryptic' notes on Fritz Kapp from 'bits and pieces' of information available from occasional written Indian sources. I also managed to see photographs taken by him of Calcutta, Darjeeling, London and Dhaka. Initially, the few photographs by him that I came across were those published in books, until at long last I was able to track down his original ones. After more than two decades, I now possess an enviable collection of both his original and reproduced photographs. In this regard, friends, contacts, private collectors and dealers in Calcutta, Darjeeling, London and Dhaka were of great help and encouragement. Slowly, a story on Fritz Kapp also started to emerge, however sketchy or incomplete at first.

Except for the photographs taken by Kapp in Calcutta, Darjeeling, Dhaka, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bihar, Delhi and elsewhere in British India, no worthwhile

studio in Calcutta at 3, Humayon Place, off 17 Chowringhee Road which was active from 1896-1903. Both the studios bore the name of 'F. Kapp & Co., Photographers'. Edward Hickmott Sache, son of the notable European photographer John Sache of Calcutta, born of his second wife, Anne, was Fritz Kapp's assistant in Calcutta from 1896-1903. He also served as Kapp's manager from 1900-1901 in Calcutta and, as his assistant at the Darjeeling studio in 1898.

Kapp's clientele in Calcutta and Darjeeling were mostly European. However, it also included the Indian elite and the newly emergent Indian middle classes particularly of Bengal as well, who too, were desirous for 'self-memorialization', that is, an earnest wish to be 'immortalized' for posterity through the new visual medium of the camera. It is on record that Fritz Kapp, photographed the devastation wrought by the 'Great Bengal and Assam Earthquake' of 1897. He also produced a photo-album showing some of the railway construction in Eastern India. I had an opportunity to view these rare images in a private collection in London.

Before the publication of my first book, 'Rare Photographs of Eastern Bengal' (1880-1940), 2003, I spent a week at the British Library in London in 1999. I called on the then Deputy Director, Graham Shaw, who after offering some kind suggestions and advice, introduced me to a distinguished

Dhaka as a Capital City'. We are thankful to him for this gracious overture.

It appears that like many other European photographers in Calcutta, Fritz Kapp, too, had set up a studio which was active from 1888-98, in Carlton House, Darjeeling, the then summer capital of the of British Raj. A very rare and fascinating lantern slide taken by Fritz Kapp of his photo-studio with the snow capped Himalayas as the backdrop, establishes this fact. Also, a cabinet card photograph of an English boy named Alexander Ross Topping, aged 2 years and 10 months, taken on 30th Nov, 1896, in this same studio, is further provenance of Kapp's presence in Darjeeling during that period. Both these two rare images by Fritz Kapp, were passed on to me by my hugely resourceful and learned friend, Hugh Ashley Raynor, of London, UK.

Unlike in Calcutta, Fritz Kapp, was the only noteworthy European professional photographer to have set up a studio for business in Dhaka during the colonial period. He became an object of intense curiosity in Dhaka and thus attracted a lot of attention from eager clientele in East Bengal. All available evidence suggests that it was actually Nawab Ahsanullah (1848-1901) of Dhaka, an avid photography enthusiast and practitioner, who first came in contact with Fritz Kapp in Calcutta and invited him to visit and open a studio in Dhaka, and not his son Nawab Salimullah (1871-1915) as some have mentioned. However, Ahsanullah suddenly died in 1901, and Salimullah enthusiastically carried on with the patronage of Fritz Kapp started by his father. However, it is a fact that Fritz Kapp finally relocated to Dhaka and opened a studio in 1903-04, during Nawab Salimullah's time.

Earlier on, Fritz Kapp had already started to occasionally visit Dhaka from 1892 onwards as a 'travelling photographer' to the Dhaka Nawab family. I have an original copy of his official seal from that particular period as provenance. In 1892, the daredevil American balloonist Jeanette Van Tassel and her troupe visited British India. In Calcutta, Jeanette was an instant sensation, especially because she was a brave young woman aeronaut. Fritz Kapp, not only photographed her during her sojourn in Calcutta, but also worked with her agent in promoting Jeanette's visual advertisements. Kapp also came to Dhaka along with Jeanette and her troupe to cover her visit. Nawab Ahsanullah had commissioned Jeanette for a princely sum of 10,000 rupees to exhibit her incredible feat by displaying her aeronautical skills. Sadly, Fritz Kapp was also the last to photograph the preparations of her fatal flight which killed her in the winter of 1892, in Dhaka. There is documented evidence of it.

As ill luck would have it, by the end of the 19th century Kapp had started to sustain huge losses in his photographic businesses both in Calcutta and Darjeeling. There was stiff competition from a plethora of popular European and Indian photographic studios in Calcutta as well as in Darjeeling. Therefore, by 1898 he was forced to close down his studios at 29 Chowringhee Road in Calcutta and Carlton House in Darjeeling. And, by 1903 he had no option but to close down his last photo-studio in Calcutta at 3, Humayon Place. This was a turning point in his life and career, because he now shifted his focus completely to Dhaka from Calcutta.

Accordingly, it can be presumed that Fritz Kapp and his family took up residence in Dhaka and moved here in 1903-4. He set up his studio at Wiseghat on the picturesque bank of the Buriganga river in close proximity to Ahsan Manzil, the palace of the Dhaka Nawabs. His address in Dhaka would eventually read as 'Fritz Kapp, Photographer, Wise Ghat Road, Dacca, E. Bengal and Assam' (with effect from the Partition of Bengal in 1905). The year 1904, was a very busy and eventful year for Fritz Kapp in

Dhaka. He extensively photographed the antiquities of Dhaka and its environs as well as the Dhaka Nawab family; their palace Ahsan Manzil including other properties in greater Dhaka. Quite a bit of vintage photography from this period have survived and is held by the British Library in London and some at the National Museum in Shahbagh, Dhaka. Kapp was also fascinated by the wild, picturesque and exotic Chittagong Hill Tracts and its tribal chiefs, particularly those of the Chakma Circle. In 1897, he had produced a fine formal portrait of the Chakma Raja Bhuban Mohan Roy in his ceremonial investiture costume and regalia, in one of his Calcutta studios. The connection with the Chakma raja was made. Once he had set up his business in Dhaka in 1903-4, Kapp made several exacting trips in 1907, 1909 and 1911 to Rangamati in the Chittagong Hill Tracts to photograph the Chakma raj, the enchanting town of Rangamati and its tribal peoples. Only a modest photographic portfolio of this endeavor has survived.

In the meantime, Fritz Kapp, also covered the important visits of the Viceroy Lord Curzon to Dhaka in 1904, prior to the Partition of Bengal in 1905 and, that of Sir Bampfylde Fuller, the first Lieutenant Governor of the newly created province of Eastern Bengal and Assam in 1905. It is also certain that Kapp went with Nawab Salimullah of Dhaka to cover the Delhi Coronation Durbar of King-Emperor George V and Queen Mary in December 1911, as the Nawab's personal photographer. He briefly covered the important visit of Lord Hardinge, the Viceroy and Governor-General of India to Dhaka in 1912, since the official photographer of the Viceroy was Johnston & Hoffmann, one of the two most celebrated photographic studios of Calcutta, the other being the legendary Bourne & Shepherd, once reckoned to be the oldest active photographic studio in the world - an enviable distinction - now sadly defunct due to the advent of digital photography. It finally closed its doors in 2016, after a historic record of continuous service spanning a grand total of 176 years from 1863-2016.

For years I have often pondered as to why Fritz Kapp suddenly lost his business interest in Dhaka and simply vanished? Initially, it seemed that he had sold his studio and photographic equipments to the budding camera enthusiasts, Khawja Afzal and Sulaiman Qadr, of the extended Dhaka Nawab family probably in 1914, who were already engaged in photography in Dhaka. In the meantime, I became privy to a tragedy in 1907, which had occurred in the Fritz Kapp family while they were living in Dhaka. The information came from an acquaintance, Susan Farrington, in London and it reads from a burial register of the Dhaka Christian Cemetery at Narinda in Wari. It is a sad entry of: Christina Welhelmine KAPP, Died 5 February 1907 at the age of 2 years 5 months 19 days.

[BR: Christina Welhelmine. Infant daughter of Frederick Fritz KAPP and Adela Martha Elizabeth, his wife. Cause: Meningitis].

Although the tragedy must have felt like an ill-omen to the Kapp's, they did not leave Dhaka. In fact, they did not have a choice. By then, Kapp had already closed his businesses in Calcutta and Darjeeling and reinvested in his Dhaka photography business by opening a new studio. Therefore, even after the traumatic loss of their daughter, Kapp remained quite busy in Dhaka until the outbreak of WWI in November 1914, finally ruined him.

In this regard, I wrote to my friend Hugh Raynor in London to shed some light to my unanswered question regarding the sudden 'mysterious disappearance' of Kapp from Dhaka, in 1914. Hugh posted the following plausible explanation from London to my query. He wrote: "I rather suspect that if Kapp was still around in 1914, he didn't get to leave India at all, but spent

the entire war period in an internment prison camp! Julius Hoffmann, of Johnston & Hoffmann's suffered the same fate, as did several other German and Austrian photographers in British India (and in the UK and all other parts of the Empire!). Their studios were either virtually confiscated, or they were made to sell them off at a loss; all very unfair, especially for men who had done nothing wrong other than to have had German parents, even though they had lived and worked in India for decades, and were in no way German sympathizers or spies. The same thing happened again in WWII. One of the many iniquities of the British Empire, I'm afraid!"

The factual and logical explanations of Hugh Raynor are plausible ones. The virulent anti-German hysteria unleashed by the British at the advent of World War I, and its tragic consequences for a German photographer like Fritz Kapp in British India, may be the reason why he seems to have suddenly vanished without a trace! Was Kapp interned at the Dhaka Jail along with his family, kept under house arrest or even removed altogether elsewhere in India during the whole duration of WWI? We do not have the details except for the fact that he and his family were surely interned somewhere in British India during that period.

During my research, I also came by a rather curious and interesting document of a court case filed in the Calcutta High Court in 1916, by one Abdul Qader Khalifa (tailor) of Dhaka against Fritz Kapp for non-payment of dues for his tailored clothes in 1914. The document shows Fritz Kapp's presence in Dhaka until November 1914, the beginning of WW I. Also, according to this document the case was filed at the Calcutta High Court in 1916, when Kapp was still in India in confinement.

However, my last lingering question still remains unanswered. And, that is, whatever happened to Fritz Kapp and his family after the cessation of the WWI in 1918, that is, on his subsequent release thereafter from confinement? Did Kapp get to leave India immediately on his release? Because, had he continued living in India after 1918, there would have been some evidence of it. So, where did he go? There are three speculative versions emanating from foreign sources which have emerged in the last few years. These are that: Kapp had proceeded to Russia from India on his release. This can be discarded outright. It is utterly nonsensical. Russia was in great turmoil following the October Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and therefore, the most unlikely place for a foreigner to visit, let alone think of settling down. The next possibility hints at Kapp emigrating permanently to USA, which is a tenable assumption. However, we have yet to come by any tangible proof of it. And, last of all the natural conclusion put forth is that Kapp went right back to his home country in Bavaria, Germany for good. This is the most plausible and acceptable one. Kapp and his family must have been traumatized and also pauperized after years of business debacles and prolonged incarceration in British India. Therefore, anyone in his miserable condition would automatically feel inclined to head back to one's motherland, to be with his kith and kin for emotional support and survival. Sadly, the only information I have come by so far is that Kapp hailed from Bavaria in Germany. Therefore, details of this too, need to be looked into. However, one thing is certain that Fritz Kapp and his family left British India for good soon after their release from internment in 1918.

Syed M Taifoor (1885-1972), the eminent historian and antiquarian of Dhaka, used to fondly recall Fritz Kapp as the "that wearing photographer sahib from Bavaria."

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Elephants on the March, Pilkhana, Dhaka, 1904. Photo: Fritz Kapp, Dhaka

biographical information on him is available anywhere. There are occasional scant mention of him emanating from Indian sources in books dealing with visual imagery and culture. A couple of Indian sources have also opined that he was a lesser known European photographer in Calcutta, when compared to the big names of that era, such as, Bourne & Shepherd, Johnston & Hoffmann and other prominent ones. I, however, opine otherwise. Fritz Kapp may have been less successful in his photography business compared to some others of that ilk, but I rate him as a highly skilled professional photographer. Sadly, to date there is no definitive account written on him and hence this modest effort on my part.

From all available accounts and provenance, it is certain that Fritz Kapp followed a host of other European photographers to colonial India for luck, fame and fortune. Between mid 19th to early 20th century, there was an overabundance of approximately 200 European and Indian photographers, including numerous photographic studios in Calcutta alone. Therefore, the competition was stiff. From the information now available, it is certain that Kapp arrived in Calcutta in the 1880s, because there are recorded evidence that he had set up his first photographic studio in Calcutta at 29, Chowringhee Road which was in business from 1888-98, and yet another

specialist on visual imagery, John Falconer, a great authority on vintage photography of colonial South Asia, South East Asia, and Africa. He was then the custodian (director) to a stupendous photographic collection which is kept at the Oriental and India Office Collections at the British Library, London. John also shared with me a newly acquired old photo-album on Dhaka containing photographs by Fritz Kapp taken in 1904. What he had actually showed me was a part of the photo-album known as the 'Curzon Collection' containing 30 gelatin-silver prints commemorating the visit of Viceroy Curzon to Dhaka in 1904. Although, it does not specifically deal with Curzon's visit, yet it presents us with an engaging view of the historical edifices of Dhaka of that time. These alluring photographs are mostly on the antiquities of Dhaka representing the quaint Mughal and colonial era buildings. John had bought the album from a London dealer for £200. In 2010, on behalf of the British Library, John most graciously downloaded online these riveting photographs of old Dhaka by Fritz Kapp. Thus, the series of photographs now available online with the 'British Library' red labels, are all from the same album he had shared with me. I have it from informed sources in London, that John had conscientiously released these images from the said album in the public domain, to coincide with the celebration of '400 years of