

**THE MUNICIPAL MARKETS OF CALCUTTA, 1876-1947:
'NATIVE' NEGOTIATIONS AND COLONIAL TRANSLATION OF A
METROPOLITAN MODEL**

SYNOPSIS

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY (IN ARTS) AT JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY

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2021

The present thesis focuses on the emergence and development of a municipal market system in colonial Calcutta between the years 1876 and 1947. The system was part of the colonial government's project of reorganizing the space of retail in the city. The study intends to be mainly historical and takes into account the historical process whereby the municipal market experiment in Calcutta proceeded under the aegis of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, involving the establishment of Sir Stuart Hogg Market, Sir Charles Allen Market, Lansdowne Market, College Street Market, Entally Market, Lake Road Market, Gariahat Market and Park Circus Market over a period of seventy-one years beginning in 1876.

However, the thesis does not study the genesis and development of the municipal market system in Calcutta as a matter of institutional history, isolated from the surrounding and embedding currents of economic, social and political history. The thesis, studying the municipal markets in colonial Calcutta, as a historical phenomenon stands at the intersection of the metropolitan and the colonial, the colonial and the national, the institutional and the social, the economic and the cultural. The municipal market in Calcutta, its emergence and development between the years 1876 and 1947, must be situated between the transnational space of metropole-colony flow of ideas and capital on the one hand, and at the complex intersection of the different forms of power that locally constituted the social, economic and political life of the city. The present examination of the municipal market system in Calcutta probes the relevant intersection of the global and the local in examining why the system emerged when it did and how it transformed over time.

This thesis argues that the municipal markets in colonial Calcutta, though derived from the metropolitan model, was not a mimesis of the Market Hall in Britain. So, the thesis argues that far from inseminating a mimesis of the Market Hall, Calcutta's urban specifics under late

colonialism produced a veritable colonial translation of the metropolitan model; that too, a translation that transformed over time as the life in the city traversed from one historical moment to another.

Acutely aware of the exigencies of colonial rule specific to the city of Calcutta in the late nineteenth century, the European-led municipal administration took no time to realize that the Market Hall model would have to be modified in order to address the realities of the contingent situation in colonial Calcutta. Again, in applying the model to Calcutta, the Corporation had to factor in concessions to crucial 'native' interests, without whose cooperation the success of the market experiment was thought to be in jeopardy. Indeed, the everyday of the municipal market in Calcutta under British rule demonstrates the ways in which the colony, with its own contingent history and the agency of its own 'native' population, too, could very well transmute the modular. Unpacking the contingent situation in the colony in all its specificity, the thesis identifies the different 'native' agencies specific to Calcutta's colonial context - agencies which variously inscribed their signature on the municipal markets in Calcutta.

A market being basically an economic entity, the question of 'native' economic agencies, negotiating its everyday workings, and transforming it, is understandably germane to the thesis. But, then, markets are so inextricably entangled in the social! So, the role of social power, institutions, and developments in challenging the verbatim implementation of the Market Hall in Calcutta has been an important dimension to necessarily explore. Calcutta's urban condition was shot through not only with race but also class, caste, gender, and religious difference of a historically contingent kind; each of such dynamic had its own role in the cumulative colonial translation of the metropolitan model.

Talking about the role of class in giving distinctive contours to the municipal market experience in colonial Calcutta, the thesis particularly emphasizes the role of the middle-class in the city.

The thesis argues that the planned, ordered and hygienic environment of municipal markets in the city broadly matched the Bengali middle-class's desired order of things. This did not mean a complete convergence between the official intentions on the one hand, and the Bengali middle-class's acceptance of the municipal markets, on the other. The nationalist self-perception of the middle-class along with the communal politics made them assert their difference on the space of municipal markets too. Besides the middle class, the thesis argues that the subaltern agencies who moved through the municipal markets space also transmuted the derived model of the municipal market with an infusion of immense plurality and complexity, specific to every day in the immediate colonial situation.

The second crucial aspect of the thesis's argument no less important than the argument about colonial derivation and translation, relates to the way in which the municipal market was devised and administered as a mechanism of control by the powers that be in colonial Calcutta. By inaugurating the municipal markets, the Calcutta Municipal Corporation sought to control the market experience in the city in the interest of British capital, the British-owned mercantile firms in the city, the European residents of Calcutta and, of course, the permanence of colonial rule. Created to address the problem of 'disorder,' the municipal markets in Calcutta, however, never managed to assuage the elite's fear of disorder. The problem of disorder worsened when Calcutta's marketplaces, linked to the global networks of trade and commerce dominated by the capitalist system, invariably experienced the impact of price rise, hyperinflation during the tumultuous years of the Great Depression and Second World War. Thus, the instruments of control, as this thesis argues, had to be frequently revamped and reoriented during the period under consideration.

Another argumentative strain that informs the thesis throughout - that no form of power and no mechanism of control can be understood in isolation from the politics of space. It should not be missed that even while such geometricization was following the current architectural

aesthetic, it was also inchoately a spatial quest for order and control, in tandem with the ideal of capitalist rationality and logic of state surveillance. The middle-class idea of spatial order was marked by nationalist self-perception leading to a nationalization of the municipal-market space through the introduction of a new set of signs, symbols, activities, and ideological markers. The various subaltern agencies often sought to assert their claim/s to the market precincts by contesting the dominant spatialization, which rattled the colonial and the nationalist phases of market governance.

Another question that has informed the present thesis is the significance of the web of interrelations that tied the colonial world to its metropolitan counterpart. This thesis argues that the site of Calcutta's municipal markets can unravel the inter-constitutive nature of the colony and metropole and their deeply connected histories. It was not a one-way determination of the colony's municipal markets by the metropolitan market model but a complex, two-way, incessant intermingling where the municipal market experiments in the colony also inscribed the metropole.

Chapter One of this thesis argues that the variegated Orientalist perceptions of the Europeans towards the bazars in Calcutta, in the backdrop of the 1870s turn in capitalism and the pronounced racist ideology of the British Empire after 1857, were important agents and factors in pushing for a municipal market in colonial Calcutta. Chapter Two reflects on the adaptation of the metropolitan market model in colonial Calcutta. It argues that the negotiations and contestations made the municipal markets different from the pre-existing bazars, yet not a complete mimesis of the Market Halls of Britain. Chapter Three has highlighted the middle class and its politics as another distinctive turn, determining the different historical trajectory of the municipal markets in Calcutta. Chapter Four focuses on the transformation of the municipal markets in Calcutta during the more eventful decades of the Great Depression and Second World War. Chapter Five argues that the agency of the subaltern groups shot through

the municipal market plan, as envisaged by the colonial state and middle-class, further translating the derived model of municipal markets in the colony.

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