

ABSTRACT

OF

THE MUNICIPAL MARKETS OF CALCUTTA, 1876-1947:

‘NATIVE’ NEGOTIATIONS AND COLONIAL TRANSLATION OF A

METROPOLITAN MODEL

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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.

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 thesis argues that the emergence and development of the municipal markets in Calcutta, 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.

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. It argues that far from inseminating a mimesis of the Market Hall in Britain, 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. 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.

Another crucial argument of the thesis 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. 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 the Second World War. Thus, the instruments of control, as this thesis argues, had to be frequently revamped and reoriented during the period under consideration. Linked to this is another argumentative strain, 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 of the space of municipal markets, 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. Besides the thesis argues that 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.