

From *Palki* to Automobile: A ‘Transport Revolution’ in Calcutta 1827-1947

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The Transport system of Calcutta witnessed tremendous changes during the colonial period, in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The colonial masters attempted to modernise the nascent city of Calcutta, through the introduction of newer modes of surface transport. The advent of modern horse-drawn carriages which gradually replaced the traditional *Palkis* and the trams and automobiles in Calcutta shaped the history of the city and its society. The city witnessed the emergence of various European horse-drawn carriages in the early nineteenth century and later the tramways and automobiles. The introduction of these new modes of transport revolutionised the burgeoning urban settlement in a true sense, as it happened in a part of the world where a few decades back, such developments were unthinkable. Socio-cultural aspects were deeply influenced by the arrival of the technological marvels like trams and automobiles. The surface transport system became intertwined with the soul of Calcutta and the people who lived here. It gradually started to define their way of life and also ushered in a new age of social and cultural development. The constant interactions between the new transport technology and the society initiated the process of development, and created new social classes and pockets of settlements which started emerging in the newly developed areas of the nascent metropolis. This social transformation was an impact of the improved transportation infrastructure and the mobility it provided. The mobility supported a new urbanising trend which in turn led to the gradual growth of a multifaceted social culture which can be easily separated from the Black Town culture that was prevalent in the previous era. The

revolution that gathered momentum during the colonial era gradually came to an end with the disruption of life during the Partition. The thesis attempts to explain the history of the colonial transport system and the subsequent ‘Transport Revolution’ in Calcutta – a phenomenon which will be looked upon with a critical analysis of the technological advancement and its implications for the society and the reactions of the contemporary people.

I have divided my thesis into four chapters, namely The Onset of British Colonialism and Modern Transport in Calcutta, From *Palki* to *Brougham*: The Beginning of the ‘Transport Revolution’ in Colonial Calcutta, The Advent of Trams: A Watershed in the History of Colonial Calcutta, The Emergence of Automobiles in Calcutta: A History of Mobility and Development. In my first chapter, I have focused on the arrival of steamboats and steam powered ships in Calcutta and how in the absence of proper roads, the British utilised the canals of the city to ensure unhindered all year-round mobility within the city limits and beyond. One might argue the need to a dedicate a chapter to water based transport system in a thesis focusing on the evolution of surface transport in Calcutta. But to understand the ‘Transport Revolution’ one must learn about the initial developments in the sector of transport. The water transport system was not to be the mainstay due to the unpredictable weather and unreliable navigability of the rivers and canals. The need to have a proper surface transport infrastructure and equally suitable vehicles to ensure unhindered mobility of the British colonial activities was derived from the shortcomings of the water transport system in Calcutta. In my second chapter, I have discussed how the city of Calcutta witnessed a spate of developments in the sector of infrastructure. New, modern roads were built to facilitate the horse-drawn carriages to move freely on the streets of Calcutta. I have also discussed about the traditional *Palki* and its social value and how it witnessed a change in its status after the emergence of horse-drawn carriages in the city. The third chapter brings up that era of Calcutta when it witnessed a very significant development in its transport system. The advent of tramways in the city under the British patronage

revolutionised the city and its local population, as it went on to become one of the most glowing symbols of this burgeoning colonial city. I have focused on the profound socio-cultural impact of the trams in Calcutta. The final chapter is about the culmination of the ‘Transport Revolution’ as I delve into the world of motorised transport and its emergence in Calcutta. The coming of automobiles completed the revolution in every aspect as the city came a long way ahead from its primitive days of *Palkis* and muddy roads to broad, metalled roads with gleaming automobiles running on its streets and big tramcars providing mobility to the masses of the city. I have made these chapter divisions to explain the gradual phases of change of this ‘Transport Revolution’ and how one mode of transport slowly replaced its predecessor but each of them had a very intimate connection with the people of Calcutta and the city of the soul.

In this work, I have tried to focus on the social impact of the technological changes initiated by the British in the sector of surface transport. I have tried to portray how the introduction of various modern forms of surface transport in Calcutta directly affected the lives of the local population. On one hand, the British East India Company was taking these steps, like developing the transport infrastructure to help their colonial ambitions in Bengal and India. But on the other hand, these activities also enabled the people of Calcutta to have direct interactions with the modern forms of technology. I have tried to explore these ‘interactions’ by looking through the lens of the evolution of surface transport. I have tried to project how things, which the people of Calcutta had never seen or witnessed before became an integral part of their daily lives. In Calcutta, the process of evolution of the city and its society was completely intertwined and the changes happened in gradual phases. In the first phase, with the beginning of the colonial rule in Calcutta, modern water-based transportation modes arrived. Not just the British East India Company, but also the private merchants from Britain spent their capital to develop the transport network here. Since it was just early days of colonisation and there was a dearth of proper roads, the British decided to utilise the canals and rivers of Calcutta

to get their work done. These steps were taken primarily to ensure smooth and unhindered movement of their own mercantile, administrative and military purposes. But it also helped to develop the city of Calcutta by making all areas connected and helping settlements to grow along these communication links. The foundation was thus set for the 'Transport Revolution' to begin in Calcutta. I have discussed these in detail in my first chapter. As the British gradually settled, they also had to make Calcutta habitable and connected to ensure a network of seamless communication between the port, the main town, the administrative and military quarters. They started constructing roads which paved the way for horse-drawn carriages to come to Calcutta. While the process was continuing the colonisers used the prevalent indigenous modes of transport like *Palkis*. But once the horse-drawn carriages came to the fore, the popularity of *Palkis* gradually fizzled out. The Bengali community of Calcutta which was so much dependent on this vehicle shunned it for the modern carriages which became a status symbol for the elite class and a thing of fancy for the common masses. I have tried to write this history in my second chapter. As the city of Calcutta was developing under the British patronage, it witnessed an increase in population due to influx of people from the rural countryside for livelihood purposes. This made the city require a new mode of mass transport. *Palkis* and horse-drawn carriages were not adequate to move masses, they were more of a personal mode of transport. In this scenario, the advent of tramways became a watershed in the history of Calcutta. In my third chapter, I have focused on how the trams provided faster mobility to a huge number of people in a short duration of time, thus bringing the concept of public transport to Calcutta. I have also portrayed how the tram gradually became a symbol of the city as more than the colonisers, it became hugely popular among the local population. I have discussed about how the trams soon became an integral part of their life and their daily lives became centred around the availability and service of the tramways. I have then attempted to show how the 'Transport Revolution' came to a full circle with the emergence of motor cars in Calcutta. It was the third

phase of the gradual change, which I have incorporated in my third chapter. I have tried to portray how the private British merchants popularised automobiles in Calcutta and how it became popular among the elite class of Calcutta.