

## **Rent, Infrastructure and Urban Improvement in Colonial Calcutta**

In this panel we would like to investigate the nature of urban land relations and rent-economy in colonial Calcutta to understand closely the morphology, social relations and spatial alterations that took place in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Land, rent, and revenue have been the staple for agrarian history for a long time. But what is the history of these categories in an urban set-up? What does 'property' mean in the city? How do we evaluate an urban property? What are the distinctive features of urban land that separate it from agrarian situation? How does the state try to manage it? Can we find a 'rule of property' for cities? These are some of the binding themes of the three papers of this panel. We seek to understand the role of the state in the urban land market. This becomes especially crucial from the first decade of the twentieth century when the Calcutta Improvement Trust was established. 'Improvement' has been a keyword for urban restructuring from the nineteenth century. Linked squarely with public health and sanitary regime of the city is the political economy of 'improvement'. Along with that, new settlement patterns come up with reshuffling of population. Spatial reorganization brings in its wake social dislocation, altering the character of localities and neighbourhoods. In this panel, we would like to focus on the infrastructural development of Calcutta keeping in mind some of these issues.

### **Paper I:**

#### **Infrastructural Development and the Issue of Compensation in Colonial Calcutta**

Kaustubh Mani Sengupta (Bankura University)

In this paper, I will study the issue of compensation with relation to the infrastructural development of colonial Calcutta. I will look at some cases of construction of new roads and the Strand Bank along the Hooghly in the nineteenth century. The urban improvement schemes were predicated on the availability of appropriate funds. Apart from problems arising from technical considerations, engineering difficulties or cultural disapproval, financial constraint posed difficulty at every turn. The viability of a project often depended on the guarantee of an assured 'return'—the idea of 'recoupment' was crucial, which determined the course of a scheme. Along with that, there was the problem of deciding the 'value' of the property—how does one determine the worth of the land to be taken up? What were the cultural and social elements, apart from market considerations, that influenced the decision of the state and the individual proprietors? How does one calculate the amount of compensation to be paid? Specific cases elicited different methods and often the profit of the state had to be sacrificed. Acquisition of land for public projects entailed paying up the proprietors. Some people accepted the proposition, some resented. New challenges were posed and modes of negotiations varied.

## **Paper II:**

### **The Rental Economy of a City: Calcutta Improvement Trust and the Politics of Urbanisation in the Twentieth Century**

Iman Mitra (CSSSC, Kolkata)

This paper looks at the urban question of Calcutta from the conjoined perspectives of an institutional politics of spatial organisation and everyday practices of rent extraction after the Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) started its operation in 1912. Founded by the British in the previous year to 'improve' and 'expand' the city by building new roads, clearing congested neighbourhoods and implementing various sanitisation projects which included demolition of unsavoury establishments like slums and bazaars, the CIT became one of the most influential actors not only in the domain of urban development schemes but also as a stake-holder in the sphere of urban land valuation and speculation. By restructuring the city and giving it a new look, the CIT effected two sets of urban transformation: it created a new discourse of improvement where the enhanced mobility of traffic (by building new roads and widening the older ones) was connected with reshuffling of the adjoined neighbourhoods – especially their commercialisation and valorisation; secondly, they planned to finance their schemes by acquiring, selling and renting land in these commercialised zones. While the previous studies on the CIT have mentioned these unique features and discussed its autonomous organisational structure and how it invited a range of reactions from the inhabitants of the city in the wake of its establishment, they have not focused on the shifts in the urban land market caused by the schemes initiated by the Trust. With availability of new archival materials, this aspect comes to light and one is able to explain the connections between urban development and everydayness of rent extraction and land speculation in twentieth century Calcutta.

I shall explore in the paper how the schemes under the CIT were geared to produce a more mobile, connected, expanded, sanitised and aestheticised Calcutta and that called for displacement of people perceived as impediments in the way of new order of things, demolition of already existing buildings and establishments, and acquisition of land. All of these also necessitated huge funding which could not be gathered through other elected civic bodies like the Calcutta Corporation. People evicted from the land which was acquired by the CIT for its various improvement projects were resettled in the outskirts of the city, creating the so-called suburban Calcutta. This settlement practice had an important implication. The redistribution of land among the evicted population adhered to a politics of spatial gradation of citizens themselves where the past inhabitants of hutments were pushed out of the city and the evictees from the pucca households were settled in the space vacated by the bustee dwellers. In effect, this would perpetuate recycling of land and zoning of the city according to the classes and socio-cultural identities of the citizens. One may argue that, in contradistinction with the zoning practices in the earlier times where the logic of segregation was derived from the sociality of caste, ethnic or racial hierarchies, this new form of zoning had the principle of market and a politics of rent extraction at its heart.

The paper uses the newly digitised archive of the Calcutta Improvement Trust to explore this process of creation of a rental economy in the history of urbanisation in the twentieth century. At the same time it studies how the category of rent makes its appearance – the structures, modes, actors and relationships – in an archive of urban planning and how the politics of organisation of this archive may influence the politics of categorisation itself.

**Paper III:**

**Class and Tenancy Question in Calcutta, 1912-1922**

Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay (IISER, Mohali)

In this paper, I wish to study a specific form of “primitive accumulation of capital” in the central part of Calcutta in the second decade of the 20th century. During this decade, an ambitious street scheme of the Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) recycled more than 200 acres of prime land of the city, and dis-housed at least 50000 individuals living in densely populated neighbourhoods of Surtibagan, Jorabagan, Jorasanko, etc,—where upper caste Bengali Hindu rentier class population lived with an increasingly prosperous Marwari community, a lower-middle class Bengali constituency, an up-country Muslim trading community, and a huge mass of migrant (male) working class population working in Barabazar area mostly as coolies and transport workers. The Central Avenue Scheme of the CIT in this area created a lucrative speculative land market and reshuffled the ethnic distribution of property-ownership and tenancy. This paper seeks to take a “micro-history” approach to study this transformation in Calcutta. I propose to accomplish this task by tracking the life of a street in archives. I will show how such an exercise gives us an introduction to the rental geography of a city.

The period under review is sandwiched between the 19th century traditions of urbanism and the 20th century narratives of mass political formation, and thus it has remained largely unattended by historians, despite the fact that the First World War had a significant global impact on the urban land market and tenancy relations. In this paper, I hope to address this research gap. I will also make an attempt to bring in inner-city urban redevelopment at the heart of the study of Primitive Accumulation of Capital.