

24th August 2017, 9:30 – 11 am

Panel 1: **Crisis, Violence and the Public Space**

(Discussant: Pushpendra Kr. Singh, Chair: Dipankar Sinha)

Criminalizing the Migrant: Street Carriers and the Colonial State in 19th-20th Century Calcutta and Bengal

*Dr. Somdatta Chakraborty, Research and Programme Associate, MCRG,
Email: somdatta19@gmail.com*

This abstract seeks to enquire into the contested spaces of negotiations between the colonial state and the street carriers of late 19th and mid twentieth century Calcutta and beyond. As the Raj became familiar with the demography of this old city and the customs of the classes there in, it spared no efforts in exercising its right to restrain, define and control the same. The 2nd city of the British Empire remained mobile principally through the labour of the innumerable members of the working classes who for all their efforts and sacrifices remained largely invisible and unrecognized. A conspicuous section of this working class stock manned the different kinds of transports running in the city. As with time, this class went on swelling, in number and influence, among its working class peers, the British government saw to it that they do not experience social mobility and thus remain confined within their peripheral, migrant identity. Bengal has traditionally been a riverine province-- its multiple lakes, rivers and sea offering employment to a considerable section of fishermen and boat people. The sheer numerical strength of such water carriers and the fluidity of their occupation made it difficult for the colonial state to control their existence and operation in- toto. The brunt of this perhaps fell on the land transport workers as the British government tended to fasten its noose around the street carriers. Running on mappable roads and alleys, it was comparatively easier to circumscribe the existence of the latter. Here by 'street carriers' I principally imply the hackney carriage drivers and palanquin bearers who operated in the rivers and seas of Calcutta and the Bengal Presidency between the mid nineteenth and early twentieth century and use this term to this intent throughout the article. Originating mostly from Bihar, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh, the hackney carriage drivers or the palanquin bearers were migrants who had contributed significantly to the morphological evolution of Calcutta. As the city grew from strength to strength, its civic life and public sphere expanded which necessitated greater logistical connectivity. Thus over time as such

street carriers began to form the dominant sections of the transport labour force on road, they became more visible and thus susceptible to the grids of colonial control. Archival documents corroborate how the state's drive to define the multiple spheres of operation of the labouring section was elaborate and many pronged. Thus while licensing was a chosen modality of control, labelling them as 'counterfeiters', 'truants' or 'deviants' was yet another. Through this paper I propose to discuss and dissect how the colonial state systematically strove to 'otherize' this sizeable section of workers by officially portraying them as transgressors. As the workers retaliated, their response to such state sponsored censorship and criminalizing added to the ongoing discourse of power and hegemony.

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