Panel 1: Crisis, Violence and the Public Space (Critical Studies Conference August 2017)

Criminalizing the Migrant: Street carriers and the Colonial State in 19th-20th century Calcutta and Bengal

Somdatta Chakraborty

[Final Draft not to be circulated]

This paper broadly proposes to study the multi-layered dynamics between the colonial state and the hackney carriage drivers and palanquin bearers of nineteenth-twentieth century Calcutta and Bengal, with a specific aim of decoding the 'culture of transgression'[1] that the government espoused vis-à-vis such marginal people as also to review the ways in which such carriage men resisted. The concept of transgression inheres within itself a notion of violence or force, or mildly put an idea of overstepping boundaries. My attempt here would be to unpack the modalities of such transgression from the colonial imperialistic vantage point as also try and understand the coping mechanisms of the people under the scanner. Mobility and criminality—theoretically as different as chalk and cheese, were often conceived together in the colonial administrative grid to constitute a nefarious nexus that threatened stability or 'normalcy'.[2] Consequently the Raj insisted on disciplining and containing the unsettled population or the mobile communities and the usual mode was to criminalize their identities and existence. The imperial gaze was invasive enough to penetrate through all boundaries of individual space and rights as a hackney carriage driver or a palanquin bearer to the state was merely a person of the periphery; a migrant. It is commonplace knowledge that in such endeavours at controlling the periphery, the colonial state counted upon the support of the indigenous educated classes and landed elites as they felt financial solvency and social pedigree created a natural segregation between them and the people of the fringes. Whether they did collaborate or not is a matter of research and reflection but the elites or even the middle class were not usually grouped together with a hackney carriage driver or palanquin bearer as a potential criminal, probably because the settledness of the former gave the British a sense of familiarity and comfort. Here it would be apt to mention that back in their own country too, the English were circumspect about peddlers or people of itinerant occupations thus often accusing them of criminal acts.

[1] I use this concept specifically to explain the regularity and customization of various acts of transgression that the colonial state performed with regard to the indigenous populace. My argument is that transgression or violation of boundaries of indigenous life, habits and laws by the state had become so regular and frequent that these had coagulated into a sort of cultural system or into a culture of transgression.

[2] Sinha: 2008.

The trajectories of interaction of the upper echelons of the indigenous society and the colonial state or the philosophies that informed such interaction from the vantage point of the former, were qualitatively very different from that of a transport laborer of Calcutta or greater Bengal. While the upper classes gradually evolved a formal way of petitioning and protestation against the colonial government that eventually took the shape of the national struggle, the principal actors of this paper did not resort to any direct method of confrontation probably because they understood that they needed the colonial backdrop to operate and survive. Notwithstanding this awareness of the need of an overarching colonial structure to function within, I wish to argue that a transport labourer of erstwhile Bengal was reluctant to caste himself in moulds preordained by the state. And archival records document instances of evasive and arbitrary behavior of such populace to escape stereotypification as 'frauds', 'truants' and even 'criminals'.

State control permeated through the occupational spaces of such workmen by conducting license drives, organizing frequent surveys of men and their carriages, taking down ethnographic data and formulating comprehensive census lists. Each of these marked a conscious effort by the colonial administrators to comprehensively analyze and thus contain Indian nature and institutions within fixed water tight categories. Preeti Nijhar in her work specifically draws attention to such colonial acts of control, labeling and subjugation arguing that British India was not unique in this regard as the poor and working class people suffered similar fate in all the colonies of England and even in the home country. She tries to compare and contrast two collectivities- the 'criminal' classes of Victorian London and the 'criminal' castes and tribes of imperial India[3] and suggests that both being at the periphery of their respective social hierarchies, devised indigenous ways of survival.[4] Here I have borrowed her lense as it is

[3] "The British appear in the nineteenth century to have felt most comfortable surveying India from above and at a distance—from a horse, an elephant, a boat, a carriage, or a train. They were uncomfortable in the narrow confines of a city street, a bazaar, a mela—anywhere they were surrounded by their Indian subjects… There were however groups and categories of people whose practices threatened the prescribed sociological order. These were people who appeared by their nature to wander beyond the boundaries of settled civil society: sannyasis, sadhus, fakirs, dacoits, goondas, thags, pastoralists, herders, and entertainers. The British constructed special instrumentalities to control those defined as beyond civil bounds, and carried out special investigations to provide the criteria by which whole groups would be stigmatized as criminal…."(Bernard Cohn 1996:15) Also see Radhika Singha, *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in colonial India,* O.U.P, New Delhi 2000.

[4] "While there are clear differences between the two situations, there are similarities of image, of space, of social status and of social structure….Each collectivity lay at the base of its respective social pyramid. Indeed, each could be said to be marginal to the larger stratification system—a kind of underclass. During a period of rapid social and economic change, whatever their past practices, the groups labelled as 'dangerous', were forced to adopt new survival techniques."(Preeti Nijhar 2009:6)

instrumental in revealing the extent of transgressions that the state attempted as also tolerated as it came in contact with the mobile transport populace of erstwhile Bengal.

For understanding the forms of colonial 'cultural transgression' and the consequent acts of resistance, I have had to consult Home files, Intelligence Reports, Government gazettes and colonial census and newspaper reports. Colonial archival records, popularly perceived as props of governance, have always been difficult to decode and analyze. Therefore it has been necessary to stand outside the textual 'truth' of the census or other archival discourses; try to read between the lines and thus rescue the hidden subtext from an objective perspective. Almost complete absence of subaltern voices of the hackney carriage men or palanquin bearers added to the problem as it was difficult to have the archival data corroborated. For this I have consulted contemporary memoirs which being signposts of the times, either bear out or dismiss the colonial findings, and also into relevant historical literature that help in forming a neutral objective perspective.

It might be argued that the carriage people of contemporary Bengal being more visible to the public gaze, found the axe of surveillance and labeling falling on them to a far greater extent than the boatmen or fishermen. The former operated on roads and lanes of Calcutta and her suburbs and were therefore more effectively within a controllable territorial jurisdiction. One wonders about the motives behind such acts and policies. In other words, what guided the colonial zeal to limit and defame such people? To perceive the intentions behind such acts of colonial transgressions, a relative knowledge of the people who labeled and the 'victims' of such actions vice-versa, is necessary. Socially and culturally, the carriage people of the nineteenth-twentieth century Bengal were largely migrants in the city of Calcutta who through frequent cycles of immigration inadvertently introduced several elements of change in the morphology of the city. Historically, migrants have always played a significant part in Calcutta's civic life—a fact that is well documented in colonial census surveys.[5] The 1901 *Census of India* noted that if people of Calcutta and her suburbs were grouped as 'born in Calcutta' and 'born outside Calcutta' respectively, "then those born in Calcutta (302,906) will be found to form only 31.9% of the

[5] The statistical realities upheld by colonial Census surveys are seldom fullproof, as the numbers are unreliable and do not throw much light on the identity and field of operation of such sections of people. Considering that one does not know "what the census makes visible and what it erases" (Neeladri Bhattacharya 2003:20) one is needed to read beyond the figures. Colonial statistical reality is perhaps relevant only as approximations of reality and as a link to the past that cannot otherwise be approached and understood.

total, while 68.1% or more than two-thirds are born outside of Calcutta and may be termed the immigrant population of the city…"[6] A large section of these migrants took to driving hackney carriages[7] and carrying palanquins. Also, in the 'occupation' category, 'Transport and Storage' was found to employ the second highest number of people in the city area in 1901.[8]

What made these people migrate out of their native places? As the colonial rule encouraged and introduced sweeping changes in erstwhile land settlement and revenue systems, rural economy and the economically backward classes attuned to such traditional ways of life, stood to suffer irreparable damage. While historians differ as to whether colonial land policies allowed traditional rural structure to continue and hold its ground[9] or introduced irreversible changes in the erstwhile dynamics between the cultivators and the landed elite[10], they are unanimous in acknowledging the long term effects of such measures on the traditional rural way of life. Lack of patronage or sympathy from land magnates, who assumed power in the colonial land revenue system through bidding, and were mostly 'absentee landlords', led the common villager to move out of their traditional nest and look for a living elsewhere. Frequent natural calamities like famines and draughts also acted as veritable push factors. For instance, the great famine of Orissa of 1866 ravaged districts of Balasore, Cuttack and Puri and created a formidable migrant population for Bengal, most of whom took to earn their living initially as palanquin bearers. . Given that occupation based census was not taken until 1876, it might seem difficult to identify the exact proportion of 'seasonal' and 'permanent' immigrants to Calcutta before that year. Historians like Sumanta Banerjee have based his conclusions on colonial occupational statistics. Banerjee tried to surmise about the state and character of the indigenous population of Calcutta from the kinds of houses they lived in, which were either *pucca*(or houses built with brick and cement) or *kutcha* (built with mud and thatches or tiles). The occupation statistics of the period also show how almost without any exception the 'lower orders' of Calcutta lived in huts and people from better social stations lived in 'pacca' houses. Thus by Beverley's estimates[11], over

[6] *Census of India 1901*, Vol. VII-*Calcutta Town and Suburbs*
[7] Here hackney carriage drivers essentially imply men driving public horse carriages, not employed by private families or individuals.
[8] *Census of India 1901*, Vol. VII-*Calcutta Town and Suburbs*
[9] Rajat Kanta Ray and Ratnalekha Ray: 1973.
[10] Binoy Bhushan Chaudhuri: 1975.
[11] A planned comprehensive census of Bengal was taken in 1876 under the auspices of Henry Beverley, the Inspector General of Registration in Bengal.

half of Calcutta's population was living in *kutcha* houses in the nineteenth century.[12] Based on this census, Banerjee argues that it was actually the service people or people comprising the 'lower orders' that constituted the bulk of the city's population as the growing trend among people from the suburbs and beyond to settle down permanently in Calcutta was evident even as early as 1876.[13]

Of all the transport workers inhabiting old Calcutta, the palanquin bearers seemed to hail principally from Orissa, Bihar and United Provinces (modern day Uttar Pradesh). The immigration of the Oriyas into Bengal proper dates back to the nineteenth century, if not to an earlier period; the immigrants being mostly employed as cooks, domestic servants, palanquin-bearers, ordinary labourers etc. The 1891 Occupation Table returns show that in the Bengal Presidency Division as a whole, out of a total population of 100,000, there were around 47,346 palki owners and bearers.[14] Thus the 1921 census survey of Calcutta and her suburbs in Howrah and the 25-Parganas made the following observations:

> The province of Bihar and Orissa supplies nearly one in five of the Calcutta population, a greater number than what comes from the rest of Bengal outside the city and the two adjoining districts. Nearly half come from S. Bihar, from the four districts Gaya, Shahabad, Patna and Monghyr, a quarter from Orissa and most of the remaining quarter from N. Bihar…[15]

For most of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, majority of such migrants continued to be seasonal or people who flocked into the city from neighbouring Orissa at the end of each harvest

---

[12] 'The number of huts fell from 53,289 in 1821 to 50,871 in 1837. In that year the erection of huts with thatched roofs was prohibited because of fire hazards. Thatch was replaced by the more expensive tiles. The number of huts fell further to 22,860 in 1876, the year of the census. During the same period, i.e. from 1821-1876, the number of houses had increased from 14,230 to 16, 896.'(Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta*,Seagull books, Calcutta,1998, p.59-60)Noting that the falling off was 'entirely restricted to native huts', Mr H. Beverley…admitted that 'huts have largely made way for the erection of tanks and new roads…'(Census of 1876,as quoted in Banerjee,1998:60)

[13] Banerjee cites that while in 1821, around 100,000 persons visited Calcutta on a regular basis for work and then returned back home; in 1876, only about 10,000 persons frequented the city daily. Banerjee thus tries to argue that by 1876 a greater proportion of the populace from the suburbs had settled down in Calcutta and therefore lesser people were commuting.

[14] Census of India, 1891

[15] Census of India, 1921, Vol. VI: City of Calcutta, Part I-Report, by W.H.Thompson, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1923.

season and earned their living as palanquin bearers, punkha-pullers and coolies. They worked till the arrival of the next harvest season when it was again time for them to attend to harvests back home.[16] This influx from Orissa was noticeable even in mid-eighteenth century Bengal.[17] Radharaman Mitra in his extensive work on old Calcutta, notes that the earliest palanquin bearers were Bengalis who over time came to be substituted by Oriya and Hindusthani[18] migrants. Given that a Bengali carrier enjoyed far greater cultural advantage than his Oriya counterpart, such a change in the regional composition appears surprising and unnecessary. This has often been linked to a growing aversion to physical labour among the Bengali speaking people. In contrast the zeal for hard work of the *Kahar*s or the traditional Palki bearing caste from Orissa was well-known, who continued in their forefathers' profession even in their city of migration.[19] From a socio-cultural perspective, such occupational choice appears to be dictated by the familiarity of the *kahar* community with this particular occupation and also its urgency to find work in a new city. Interestingly the reluctance of the Bengalis towards manual hard work has been well-documented in contemporary British surveys. Census surveyors have highlighted this lacuna

[16] "The favourite employment of the Oriyas in Calcutta was that as palanquin or palki bearers who commanded a strength of 11,000 odd, as in 1839, as evident from the *Samachar Darpan* of 15th June of the year. The same source then mentions….that the Oriya Palki-bearers used to come back to their home-province from Calcutta with a saving to the tune of three-lakhs rupees each year on an average." *Ibid*.

[17] Hence it was possible for a colonial official, T.Motte to spot no less than 7000 Oriya palanquin bearers at work in Bengal, in the course of his journey to the Diamond Mines at Sambalpur, Orissa. He had undertaken this official trip under the aegis of Lord Clive in the year 1766.[17] Motte's account hints at strong Oriya presence in this particular occupation as they were found to form a body or 'common-wealth' headed by a president whose instructions were expected to be binding on these bearers during their years of operation in Bengal. Problems of this Oriya palanquin community was also supposed to be discussed and decided through regular 'council' meetings. Motte also refers to the palanquin bearers as 'chairmen'('chair' implying a palki). Interestingly, in his account[17], these bearers were identified as 'the stoutest young fellows' from outside Balasore in Bengal, but wrongly referred to by the Englishman and his compatriots as the 'Balasore bearers'.

[18] People from northern India, especially United provinces were known such because they conversed in Hindusthani language, which was a variant of Hindi.

[19] "…The reason is that as casual labourers they are eminently hard-working and they take up work which is generally too strenuous for the Bengali" (Census of India, 1921, Vol. V: Bengal, Part I-Report by W.H.Thompson).

though a serious racial logic may well have shaped such conclusions.[20] The regional character of the palanquin bearers witnessed further changes in later years when migrants from United Provinces (modern day Uttar Pradesh) also joined the workforce.[21] A section of migrants from Bihar, especially the weavers or *tantis* from Monghyr district, frequently opted for carrying palanquins in Bengal and in Calcutta.[22]

Hackney carriage driving was another popular occupational choice for such migrants from Bihar and U.P. They apparently stepped in to fill the void when struck by frequent natural disasters, a large number of the erstwhile carrier population of Calcutta either died or left the city.[23] This happened between 1867 and 1874 when the Fever epidemic had affected Bengal and again during the Plague in Calcutta and Backarganj around 1898. While rampage of malarial fever claimed many lives thus leading to a shortage of available labor from the adjacent districts of Bengal; the scare of plague forced much of the resident working populace to migrate out. These corroborate the 1901 census statistics where one finds no less than 12,142 'carriage drivers, stable-boys and coachmen' in Calcutta who in all probability came from the Northern provinces.

The purpose of dwelling at length on the ethnic composition of the occupational classes under review is precisely to emphasize on the liminality of their identity. My argument is that such migrant roots of these transport workers made them more susceptible to governmental discrimination and being 'outsiders' to the system in Calcutta or Bengal, they often could not garner Bengali middle class support. Though a consistently steady demand for such vehicles

[20] A permanent discourse was woven by the colonial state regarding the characteristic traits of the Indians. Ethnographic surveys and anthropometric studies informed their endeavor in this sphere through which the rulers came to form stereotypes regarding the 'nature' of each and every caste. Thus in their discourses, Bengalees were 'weak and frail' and averse to physical labour while people from Punjab were 'martial'. For incisive discussion, refer to Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the late nineteenth century*, (UK, Manchester University Press, 1995).

[21] Mitra argues that the Oriya and Hindusthani bearers virtually monopolized the task of carrying palanquins in Calcutta, thus pushing the Bengalis out off the orbit.(Radharaman Mitra, *Kolikata Darpan*: *Pratham Parbo*,3rd Edition, Calcutta, 1988)

[22] *Ibid*.281

[23] 'In the province of Bihar, the bulk of the migrants was supplied by the districts of Gaya, Patna, Sahabad, Saran, Muzzafarpur, Monghyr and Darbhanga...'(*Ibid*. 422)

argueably up to the early twentieth century[24] ensured that such carriage men remain relevant to the economic and cultural life of Bengal, this however did not make life easy for them as they continued to share an uncomfortable equation with the government. Police and many of the owners of such vehicles often drew sweeping generalizations about the 'fraudulent' nature and 'criminal' propensities of such carrier people. The correspondences revolving round such reports of 'deviant' behavior of the carriage drivers or palanquin bearers provide rich multilayered texts for deciphering the underlying play of power and resistance. Along with the modalities of control, these also draw attention to the subtle modes of everyday resistance offered by such carriage people. From a wider perspective, these records are also instructive in terms of exploring the hidden fears and complexes that compelled the colonial state to persecute a migrant hackney carriage driver or palanquin bearer in India or people of similar itinerant vocations in rest of her colonies.[25] More significantly, these select records and newspaper extracts strive to gauge the range and extent of colonial cultural transgression vis-à-vis the transport people who in turn registered symbolic resistance or every day resistance.

'Crime', 'transgressions' and resistance:

Acts of 'crime' by such carrier populace of nineteenth-twentieth century Bengal were generally limited to acts of frauds and evasion. Here mention may be made of a 1919 archival document. It contains a detailed list of behavioral instructions meant for the carriage people of Bengal. The record states that the hackney carriage drivers and palanquin bearers were expected to refrain from committing any of these 'offenses' in the course of their workday. It also points out that instances of non-adherence to the clauses stated would be treated with fine, suspension of driving licenses and even imprisonment.

The following were perceived as apparent 'offences':

(a) drunk during employment, (b) using insulting, abusive language/gesture, (c) stand elsewhere than at approved stand or loiter in public street for being hired, (d) suffer his carriage to

[24] Till 1911 palanquin bearers retained their relevance in the transport work sector-- Census of India 1911, Vol. 6-Calcutta , L.S.S.O' Malley.

[25] Nijhar's caveat is enlightening here. In her work she discusses how the process of governing and labeling the subject people was never a one-way activity as such an exercise always took the form of a dialogical relationship in course of which identities of both the rulers and the subject people were made and unmade. (Nijhar 2009)

> stand for hire across any street or alongside of any other carriage, (e) refuse to give way(when he reasonably and conveniently may do so) to any other carriage(f) willfully obstruct or hinder the driver of any other carriage in taking up or setting down any person into or from such other carriages, (g) wrongfully prevent/endeavour to prevent the driver of any other carriage from being hired, (h) demand or take more than the proper fare to which he is legally entitled, (i) refuse to admit and carry in his carriage the number of persons/marked on the registered plate affixed to such carriages or specified in the register.[26]

This particular set of instructions, except those specifically concerned with fare charges or driving of the carriages, appears unnecessary and intrusive as most of the clauses do not directly reflect the state's concern for passenger safety and this discrepancy strengthens such theories as perhaps through introducing this virtual code of conduct, the colonial power aimed to circumscribe a hackney carriage driver's movement and conduct across the city. Arrest of a particular carriage man for these 'offenses' on the basis of public complaints would have justified such strict behavioural codification and restriction. But absence of such legal records only strengthens the perception that these were mainly modalities of control and power used to discipline the peripheral men.

Efforts at such codification were often based on and in turn gave birth to random stereotyping. Here we might refer to the correspondence between Babu Pasupati Basu, the Munsif of Pabna in erstwhile East Bengal and the Secretary of Bengal in 1919. This dialogue was facilitated by the Commissioner of Police of Bengal. In this particular correspondence the Munsif is found to make conclusive remarks on the nature and habits of carriage men.

> …hackney carriage drivers are mostly wicked people and that they overcharge and extort as a rule…[27]

It is interesting how through the use of words like 'mostly' or phrases as 'extort as a rule', the Munsif makes sweeping generalizations about the 'wickedness' of the horse carriage men. This was evidently a colonial outlook to which this native government functionary subscribed. Through such acts of libel, identities of these men were appropriated only to be cast into

[26] Home/Municipal/ 1919- *The Calcutta Hackney Carriage Act 1891(Bengal Act II of 1891).*

[27] Correspondence exchanged between Babu Pasupati Basu, Munsif of Pabna to the Secretary of Bengal through the Commissioner of Police, Calcutta, 17th September,1919; as quoted in Home/L.S.G/Municipal, December 1921.

predetermined moulds of criminality. Singha's insight is enlightening here.[28] In her significant work, Radhika Singha discusses how the colonial state peddled stereotypes about the criminal propensities of the peripatetic and informal labour populace of Bengal, as it set out to overhaul the indigenous legal structure and traditions and replace it with its own legal superstructure. In a bid to establish new legal languages and categories, the British government identified 'crime' as a collective or communal activity and issued legal acts to that effect.[29] Such drastic reformulation of categories had a telling impact on the administration of justice especially in the field of criminal jurisprudence. Singha points out that the new legal enactments shifted the blame of an offense from an individual offender to the community or tribe with which his affiliations lay. And through such legal enactments, communities as a whole became susceptible to stigma. Preeti Nijhar has dwelt at length on the nature and effects of such social-constructionism or acts of labelling that informed almost every aspect of governance in colonial India. Thus both Singha and Nijhar point out how regular it was for the colonial police or other law enforcement officials to 'solve' a crime and book a criminal even before the evidences were properly furnished, if the accused happened to be from the margins of the indigenous society. While affiliation to a 'criminal' tribe or community made them more susceptible to such charges of crime, people from the sidewalks of life or in informal occupations also ran the risk of being absorbed into similar webs of crime and criminality.

Read against such a backdrop, the allegations of the colonial government against the 'innate wickedness' of the carriage men of contemporary Bengal appears to be premeditated. The observation of the Munsif of Pabna substantiates this. In many other archival sources, stray offenses by those transport workers were magnified only to be linked to their 'genetically' fraudulent nature and disposition. To elucidate, let us refer to a particular municipal record from the years 1875-76.[30] It voices the rising concern of Stuart Hogg, the-then Police Commissioner

[28] Singha:2000

[29] 'The reforms of 1772 included one significant foray into substantive law, in the form of Article 35, for punishing dacoits. This article laid down that every dacoit on conviction shall be carried to the village to which he belongs; and be there executed, as a terror and example to others; and…the village of which he is an inhabitant, shall be fined….and …the family of the criminal shall become the slaves of the state; and be disposed of, for the general benefit and convenience of the people, according to the discretion of the Government.'(Singha 2000: 27-28)

[30] Home/Judicial/ 1876.

of Calcutta for the dwindling state of hackney carriage trade in the city. He observed that over the years, a far lesser number of people were taking to hackney carriage ownership as their preferred vocation than was expected in such a lucrative trade. The Police Commissioner argued that it was the predicament of the carriage owners that discouraged and deterred them from opting for this trade in large numbers. In his views, it was the hackney carriage drivers who dominated the occupation thus placing the owners at their mercy. It was apparently the inability of the law to check the unscrupulous conduct of the carriage drivers that made the position of the hackney carriage owners even more precarious, as they were often forced to bear with the wiliness of the drivers. Perceiving the phenomenon from the vantage point of the carriage owners, Hogg had reasoned that the owners could seldom earn as much as the drivers as the latter managed to put aside most of the day's earnings for themselves, thus depriving the owners of their legitimate profit. In this particular document, state sympathy is evidently with the carriage owners. Here blame for regular pilferage of funds from the earnings of the carriage trade was put squarely on the nature of the hackney carriage drivers as they 'habitually' helped themselves with such profit. On deeper analysis, such observations and conclusions appear to be prejudiced. To begin with, it sounds a little improbable by the logic of sheer economics, for people owning the resources of the carriage trade complaining to be at the mercy of their employees. One naturally wonders whether Mr. Hogg made a thorough survey of the state of the hackney carriage trade or he merely relied upon a handful of complaints lodged by certain hackney carriage owners and had randomly generalized. Also, if the amount of the pilferage was that enormous and regular as reported, incidents of hackney carriage drivers graduating into owners of such carriages would have been more common and every day. It thus remains inexplicable why the drivers, despite allegedly making huge profits, continued to stagnate in their subordinate marginal positions. While there must have been instances when some hackney carriage drivers *did* dupe the owners, this cannot be read as a general pattern. Interestingly, one doesn't come across records where hackney carriage owners have lodged formal complaints against the pilfering traits of their drivers. Instead early twentieth century records throw up contrary instances where hackney carriage owners of Calcutta appealed against revision of certain clauses of the Calcutta Hackney Carriage Act, complaining those to be harmful for their profession as also financial wellbeing of the drivers. Juxtaposing such records with Stuart Hogg's observation clearly urges one to look beyond the generalized assumptions. Clearly the

carriage owners would not have been empathetic to the plight of their drivers had they been duped by the latter habitually, as alleged by Hogg.

Seen against such light, the observation of Police Commissioner Hogg appears colored and his opinion tilted against the carriage community, or for that matter against indigenous people of any informal occupation groups. The petition also in many ways challenges the dual world created in the contemporary colonial discourses where the hackney carriage owners or the class owning the capital and resources are pitted against the driver community.

Cases of impersonation among hackney carriage drivers especially those who drove office *jauns* was also reported to be rampant. Thus one comes across incidents of impersonation where the drivers apparently evaded the registering officers by furnishing pseudonyms and fictitious addresses. Also, on occasions where identity was not forged, the carriage drivers often took to fleeing thus avoiding court summons.[31] A usual complaint against this section of transport workers was that they disrupted law and order in the city by their disorderly driving of carriages. Most officials of the colonial police believed that there is need to restrict and control those office-jaun drivers lest they run riot in the city.[32] It was however not possible for the authorities to take immediate legal action. There being no such provisions for registering private carriages like office-*jauns*[33] which were mostly owned by private individuals, the state found it difficult to rein in the waywardness of their drivers and control the traffic situation.

While archival records of the times provide near coherent images of the actions of and against the hackney carriage drivers of Calcutta and Bengal, palanquin bearers also find their due

---

[31] '…In many cases where the correct names and addresses are given and summons duly served, the accused is absent on the date of the hearing of the case and a warrant is issued. The complainant in the case on going to the same address where the summon was served, is informed by the owner of the office-jaun that the driver has since been discharged or gone to his native country on leave, and consequently the warrants are returned with the remark "No trace" and the case filed or struck off….' Home/Political/Police/1921,- *Proposed Amendment of the Calcutta Hackney Carriage Act so as to license office jauns.*

[32]"...the traffic in the streets mentioned is abnormal and unless some check is put on the drivers of this class of vehicle, it will be impossible to regulate the traffic efficiently." *Ibid.*

[33] There were proposals for introducing registration of office-jauns, but it was not taken up on the grounds that unless a broader registration of all the privately owned horse carriages of Calcutta was attempted, office-jauns as a special class of carriages cannot be taken up. A.Cassels, the Deputy Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Political (Police) Department was instrumental in deciding not to bring privately owned office jauns under the net of licenses.

representation in the official documents. It is important here to note that colonial regulations on hackney carriages were also binding on the bearer class—both being carriers on the road. However records demonstrate that the latter's points of friction with the state were apparently far less pronounced compared to the hackney carriage men as the palanquin bearers employed various ingenious means that were evasive and perhaps 'fraudulent' to resist being stigmatized randomly by the government. These included efforts at impersonation, not adhering to the street code of conduct as expected of a driver and also perhaps at times manipulating the fare. These were symbolically every day forms of protest or resistance through which such men of the periphery registered their non-conformity with the over zealousness of the state to control and bind.[34] In the absence of memoirs from such largely illiterate sections of the working men or even oral responses of any sort, it is these instances and sites of protests that emerge as veritable mines of testimonies, underlining their constant resistance against the infringing culture of transgression.

Nineteenth century newspapers document an instance when these bearers stood up against a unilateral government decision to fix the palanquin fares to one rupee for one *kos* or mile of palanquin carriage. This fare was also meant to include the expenses of the *maslachi* or the man accompanying the bearers with a torch lamp as also the oil for the torch.[35] This official decision hit the bearers directly. Many of them argued that fixing of rents on hourly basis would translate into huge monetary loss for their community. Some pointed out that they wished to be paid as per the distance they covered as often journeys of one mile turned out to be so tiring that it consumed half of their day's energy and it was doubly frustrating since under the new rule they were slated to receive only one anna per head. In their petition, they underlined how they felt

[34] '…it seemed far more important to understand what we might call *everyday* forms of peasant resistance—the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labour, food, taxes and interest from them. Most of the forms this struggle takes stop well short of collective outright defiance. Here I have in mind the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth. These Brechtian forms of class struggle have certain features in common. They require little or no coordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms…'(Scott 1985: 29-30). This theory through directly relevant to the peasants, is pertinent for the transport workers of British India too as all such people shared a certain 'kinship' in terms of how they were perceived and treated by the colonial state.

[35] Reported from 30th October, 1819 under the heading '*dakbehara',* in Brajendranath Bandopadhyay, *Sangbadpatre shekaler katha*, vol.1, 1818-1830, Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Mandir, Kolkata, 1937, p.343.

spent in an one a half hour journey, carrying for e.g., some Bengali elite from Calcutta to Kalighat in the southernmost part of the city. Interestingly, the newspaper notes that in the years succeeding the new fare rule, there was a noticeable slump in the number of bearers in Calcutta. Certain newspapers interpreted such disappearing acts as premeditated. The native elites held that such action was either an outcome of their rebellious character or else the bearers were misdirected by other people.[36] The same newspaper report however threw light on the grievances of the bearer community and took to discuss their fear of loosing out once the fares became standardized. Most of the bearers apparently wanted the fares to be determined in terms of the distance they covered with their palanquin. Standardization of the palanquin fare as per clock time seemed to go against their interests.

Such fare regulation indeed made survival difficult for the bearer community of contemporary Calcutta and Bengal. Some newspapers interpreted this new law as a symbolic oppression of the marginalized.[37] It was argued that the bearers did not possess watch and were not conversant with clock time and therefore almost always depended on the passengers' assessment of time. Thus it was common for a native aristocrat to be carried in a palanquin for more than one hour and pay for a lesser duration of time. Possessing a watch, these men hardly paid heed to the cries of legitimate fare of the bearers. Such situations affected the bearers as absence of a watch on their person, prevented them from crosschecking the passengers' judgement of time and the fare. Worst of it all was when based upon their inherent sense of time, the bearers realized that they had been duped and tried to protest, they were reprimanded and in certain instances even penalized by the government.

Such regulations and concurrent arrangements unravel a direct attempt by the colonial government to subdue and control the bearer section. It might be argued that by fixing the palanquin rent as per clock time, the state wished to make the native bearers acknowledge the superiority of clock time—an element which time and again has been identified with progress

[36] "*…Kintu ekhon kolikatae ek beharar o mukh dekha jaye na. Ihate anuman hoye je, ihar madhye kichhu dushtota thakibek kimba keho tahardigo ke kumantrana diya thakibek…* ."**Translation**- Now face of not a single *behara* or bearer can be seen in Calcutta. This makes us believe that there must be some mischief involved in this or someone might have given them ill advice." Excerpt under the subheading *Thika Behara* or contract bearer. *Ibid:* 344-345.

[37] "*….kolikata r ek shamachar patre beharader pakhhapati hoiya keho likhiyachhen je shamay anushare beton nirupaner natun aiin hoyate beharader pran loiya tantani hoiyachhe.* **Translation**-In one of the newspapers of Calcutta, somebody has become the spokesperson of the bearers and written that with the coming of the act that determines their fare as per time, the lives of the bearers have become endangered. *Ibid.*

and western civilization. Palanquin bearers being largely rural migrants were familiar with non-linear, cyclical time. Fixing of fares by clock time was an indirect de-legitimization of all these times. Traditionally fares in Bengal had been determined both by distance and by time, and the bearers always preferred the former. They perceived the watch as a tool of deception and intrusion overriding their personal conceptions of time. As the bearers refused to give in to such transgression and be dictated by the imperial metaphor of clock, they deserted the city in large numbers. Consequently remedial suggestions poured in. Some suggested that the state should provide for a watch to each of the bearers, so that they could see the time at the onset of the journey and check it again on reaching their destination. This apparently innocuous suggestion was radical in its implications. It implied absorption of the marginalized bearers into the same time frame as the colonial masters, thus in a certain way lessening the distance between the two. Moreover, a bearer adept in checking time with the help of a watch would potentially be in a position to crosscheck the claims of the passengers. I would like to argue that such suggestions of potentially empowering the bearers were perhaps dovetailed with a subtle effort to symbolically privilege clock time or the western form of progress over the indigenous forms of time. Therefore a bearer, who would consult a watch for carrying palanquins, would invariably loose connection with the traditional world of time that was outside the domain of clock. This particular measure, I would emphasize, if implemented, would have been an outright transgression of the bearer's self and identity amounting to a near absorption of their separate mental and conceptual worlds into the western, linear hierarchical framework.

Such dichotomous relation between the carrier and bearer community and the government touched new levels of low during periods of license registration. As the government employed all the available state props to ensure that the carrier population and their vehicles register for licenses, the latter on the other hand, devised strategies for evading the process of licensing. They even took to mass absconding in order to avoid formal submission to the colonial power. The result was a far lesser number of palanquins and hackney carriages being registered for the year 1875-76 as compared to the earlier years.[38]

[38] "…at the end of that period it was found that the registration fell short in the following proportions, compared with those of the corresponding period of the previous year, namely 1301 third class carriages; 438 drivers; 109 palankeens; bearers 657; making a total deficiency of 1334".Home/Judicial/1876-*Report on the working of Hackney Carriage Act in Calcutta and its suburbs; and in Howrah, during the year 1875-76.*

Dialectics of power and control, riding on acts of transgression and resistance dominates the thematic tenor of this particular paper. As the mutually exclusive symbolic universes constructed by the colonial state and the occupational communities of the fringe came in contention with each other, force and violence was inevitable. The government apparently used the language and modality of law to bend the indigenous periphery into submission. Whether they truly succeeded or not can form the subject matter of a different study. But it is undeniable that through the processes of labelling and resistance respectively, the colonial state and the carriage men played out their conflictual relation thus making and unmaking their identities and it was the city of Calcutta and its lanes and bylanes that remained witness to such acts of claiming and reclaiming of rights and power.

Records and References:

Home/Judicial/ July 1876.

Census of India, 1891, *Lower Provinces of Bengal*, Report by C.J. O'Donnell.

Census of India 1901, Vol. VII- *Calcutta Town and Suburbs.*

Census of India 1921, Vol. V-Bengal, Part I-Report, W.H. Thompson.

Bandopadhyay Brajendranath, *Sangbadpatre shekaler katha*, (1818-1830) vol.1 (Kolkata, Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Mandir, 1937).

Banerjee Sumanta, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta*,(Calcutta, Seagull books,1998).

Bhattacharya Neeladri, "Labouring Histories: Agrarian Labour and Colonialism"*, NLI Research Studies Series,* 049(2003), V.V.Giri National Labour Institute.

Chaudhuri Binay Bhushan, "The Process of Depeasantization in Bengal and Bihar, 1885-1947", *Indian Historical Review*, II.1 (July 1975).

Cohn Bernard S., *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1996).

Mitra Radharaman, *Kolikata Darpan*: *Pratham Parbo*, (Calcutta, Subarnarekha Publications, 3rd edition, 1988).

Nijhhar Preeti, *Law and Imperialism: Criminality and Constitution in Colonial India and Victorian England,*(London, Pickering and Chatto, 2009).

Rajat Kanta and Ratna Ray, "The Dynamics of Continuity in Rural Bengal under the British Imperium: A study of quasi-stable equilibrium in underdeveloped societies in a changing world", *IESHR*, x.1 (March 1973).

Scott James C., *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1985).

Singha Radhika, *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India* (O.U.P, New Delhi, 2000).

Sinha Mrinalini, *Colonial masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the late nineteenth century*,(UK, Manchester University Press, 1995).

Sinha Nitin, Mobility, "Control and Criminality in early colonial India, 1760s to 1850s", *IESHR*, 45:1(2008).

Mitra Radharaman, *Kolikata Darpan*: *Pratham Parbo*, (Calcutta, Subarnarekha Publications, 3rd edition, 1988).