

The Calcutta Improvement Trust and the Southern Urban Question, 1910s-1950s

Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay, Iman K Mitra, Kaustubh Mani Sengupta

Abstract

The paper will map Calcutta's transition to a post-colonial metropolis and the dynamic relationship between space and polity—infrastructure and superstructure—as India moved from imperial/colonial to popular sovereignty through the trajectories of an urban institution called the Calcutta Improvement Trust. This is designed as a political and institutional history of Calcutta's spaces and fields—how did the Improvement Trust think of the city and negotiated its way through popular spatial practices, and in so doing, transformed life in the city even as it evolved as an institution? I propose to write this history via the dialectical tension of property-making and encroachment.

The Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT), now known as the Kolkata Improvement Trust (KIT), was set up in 1912 under the Calcutta Improvement Act, 1911. The purpose of this organization was to “make provisions for the improvement and the expansion of Calcutta by opening up the congested areas of the city.” Between 1912 and 1970, the CIT planned and implemented several projects in Calcutta and in its immediate suburbs.

Broadly, the CIT adopted two approaches to the improvement of the city. First, it had a ‘General Improvement Scheme’ whereby it sought to improve the public health condition of Calcutta by ‘wiping out insanitary areas’ (such as slums, and bazaars). Second, it undertook a massive street scheme that decongested a large part of the central Calcutta and connected the city with its immediate suburbs.

The late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century was a moment of improvement trusts in the British Empire. Although ‘improvement trust’ as an idea began in Glasgow, it found a suitable ground only in the colonial cities and that too in the first half of the twentieth century. Why? This paper situates the CIT as part of a larger late-colonial capitalist logic of urbanization—via urban rent. What does it say about urban governmentality in the last four decades of the British Empire? We posit this as a ‘Southern Question.’

The CIT is endowed with several repositories of planning and real-estate documents that are essential to reconstruct the histories of Calcutta in the twentieth century. Although the CIT was envisioned in the model of the Bombay City Improvement Trust (set up in 1898 in response to the Plague epidemic of 1896), its operation was fundamentally different due to the basic difference in the character of the ownership of the city land in the two cities. While in Bombay, substantial land was still owned by the government, in Calcutta land ownership rested on numerous private players with a complex tenancy structure. The CIT was empowered with the authority to acquire land. The process of land acquisition for the improvement of the city infrastructure involved layered negotiations with the property owners and rate payers of the city who had already started gaining a distinct civic voice thanks to the gradual devolution of power and the introduction of limited democracy in all the three important civic bodies of Calcutta in the early twentieth century: the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, the Calcutta Improvement Trust and the Calcutta Port Trust.

Very little is known about the interaction among the central schemes of the CIT in releasing the real-estate of Calcutta to the streams of the colonial-global capital. What were the institutional mechanics through which a new regime of accumulation in the land market was set in? How can one think of the relationship between rent and capital accumulation in a city in the interface of colonialism and nationalism? How did various planning proposals seek to arrange bodies and things in a finite place of the colonial city formally divided in racial enclaves to ensure navigation?

The Improvement Trust constituted an apparatus of the colonial mode of governing the city. The precondition for its efficiency was an authoritarian right over space under colonial sovereignty. The Trust's notion of urban improvement was incompatible with mass democracy, which enabled a different relationship between space and polity under popular sovereignty. Hence, the decline of the Improvement Trust in Calcutta was bound to set in during the post-colonial era. The Improvement Trust's renewal strategy collapsed completely when refugees, slums, and squatter-dwellers entered the city's electoral arithmetic and politicized displacement. Despite its doubtful legality, *jabardakhal* (or popular encroachment by force) became a recognizable form of claiming space during the middle of the twentieth century, amidst massive colonization of land, locality formation, growth of fringe economies, and mass democracy. It forged new interfaces between space and polity and became a critical colonizing and urbanizing agent in the frontiers of Calcutta.

When compared with the enclosure and commodification of land undertaken by the Improvement Trust in urbanization schemes of the late colonial era, space-making through encroachment after independence presents a contrasting picture. In the latter case, urbanization happened through the decommodification of encroached-upon properties and the conversion of 'wastelands' into habitable properties through popular acts of reclamation. These two modes of urbanization and spatial mobilization in the south involved an intense inter-conversion between private property, public property, and the commons.

Arguably, the institution that received the most severe blow due to *jabardakhal* movement was the CIT. All the vacant houses and acres of inner-city land acquired or built over decades became disputed refugee settlements. In the course of time, the Trust was absorbed into the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) as merely a department. Subsequently, the Trust was expelled from its imposing office building at 5 Clive Street (now Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Road) and was shifted to a more modest building in the formerly Tiretta Bazaar (adjacent to Central Avenue, now named after Netaji's political mentor C. R. Das), close to a massive garbage vat. In 2008, when I began to explore its archive, the Trust maintained a bare office floor whose approach and staircases sheltered numerous pavement dwellers, and it struggles to clear the dues of perhaps the last batch of its permanent staff members. In 2017, the state government further merged the CIT with two other planning organizations, citing 'inefficiency' and the lack of 'work culture' among its staff members. What does the institution's gradual decline tell us about Calcutta's post-colonial modernity? What does it say about the project of planning in a post-colonial metropolis?