

## **Smoke, Dust and Betrayal: Nineteenth Century Market Towns in Climate Change** **Sohini Sengupta and Ajit Kumar Pankaj**

What can colonial era market towns that can be described as ‘cities in waiting’ contribute to a discussion around the ‘City as the Southern Question’? Drawing on the idea of a city that is empirically, conceptually, and historically, distinct from the usual categories that mark distinction – smart, sustainable, futuristic, automated, divided or preserved, we discuss the historical emergence of colonial market-towns. Such towns rose along the nodes of rail networks in the mid nineteenth century, on the ruins of fortress towns, despite war and famines to open agriculturally peripheral areas to promote trade in grains and oilseeds, as the principal precolonial trade centres in eastern UP went into involution and decline, new trader - entrepreneurs coalesced around the market towns and streams of rural migrant labour began travelling eastwards to work in Kolkata Jute factories. Based on our ongoing fieldwork in Bundelkhand, chronically drought affected region on the geographic and agroecological periphery of the Northern Gangetic plains, we raise and address the following questions: how small market towns (in undivided Banda district), described by some historians as sites of vitality and continuity through conflicts, famines, and political change, became reconfigured as backward tracts populated by bandits, failed water projects as a site of feudal and caste oppression? How do the perceived ravages of climate change measured by water scarcity and water heritage affect such imaginings? What do residents mean when they frame their own historically situated ‘southern questions’ through concepts such as resurgence-decay-death?

Our explorations suggest that local concerns are tied to understandings of space, place and belonging that are anchored in community identities and institutional moorings, that enables reconfiguring the southern question into thought-experiments where the ideas about collective futures are floated, through continuous remaking of connections with the shifting fragments of the past. Actors from civil society organizations are pessimistic about this future due to the perceived continuity in the extractive and exploitative origins of urban consumption at the cost of the nature, the rural, the oppressed castes, women, and environment (moral decay). Those dependent on the emergence of new pilgrim and heritage business go beyond the observable lack of services and comforts, to describe the unique qualities of the place (moral hope). While administrators declare the end of the age of banditry through stricter policing. Extractive logic underpins the growth of such towns, as surplus produce, commodified water, building sand, migrant labour continues to travel while public infrastructures (from railways to water projects) are reconstituted for the present through ‘distinct vectors of accumulation’ (Laura Bear). But while both extraction and exploitation are stark, also visible are the willingness of the town’s residents to engage with critical political questions about redistribution and justice through distinct experiences of exploitation. Colonial market towns in Bundelkhand, provide a uniquely ‘Southern’ context to understand capitalism in the twenty first century that appears to promote maldistribution and extraction by promoting private investment and speculation, in this case – around water - that is reminiscent of colonial economies.