Revisiting the Calcutta Improvement Trust in early 20th Century Calcutta

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Although both these town planners put forward very different methods to tackle the problem of urban congestion, both emphasized the importance of maintaining a healthy workforce within the boundaries of the city as an integral task of governing the city. Both sets of plans were premised on seeing Indian residents as ‘productive agents’, i.e., as beings who can generate wealth if they are looked after properly. However, none of the schemes propounded by these townplanners could be successfully applied by the CIT. Herein lie the anxieties of colonial governmentality—the need to make profit and the need to regulate life in its most beneficial state.

Imperatives of the imperial economy downsized planning schemes into an under-developed and extractive model that saw people as subjects and not citizens. Although the Trust was initiated in 1911, its operations continued well into the 1920s and 30s. Led by colonial bureaucrats and civil engineers, the Trust sought to undertake large scale land acquisitions and road development projects. Once slums were cleared and roads were built, it increased the value of the surrounding land, which made it impossible to rehouse the poor population in the same area. The operations of the Trust led to commodification of urban land and they also deprived people of the land to wealthier clients. This profit helped to further sustain the operations of the Trust, as it went on to undertake more large scale infrastructural projects (although most of them ended in failures), which included a canal drainage system, suburban development and building of a secondary port. Unlike Geddes (and to a lesser extent Richards), who associated with the poor, the Trust linked development to profit based on material infrastructure and divested from society itself.

Notes


3 Geddes, P. 1914. ‘Preventive surgery’. In his 1914 report, Richards put great emphasis on low income housing and suburban development as a necessity in urban society. He believed that town planning was actually ‘folk planning’. In 1918, he undertook a survey for CIT and forwarded a planning scheme for particular locality (Rabindra Sarovar) in Calcutta. While Richards tried to create what he believed to be a ‘more satisfactory urban environment’ within his Western-conceived cultural framework, Geddes was particularly critical of programmes that ignored the needs of people who were destroyed and the housing and social life of the urban community, especially the urban poor. He believed that the plans for a future could only be drawn after unravelling the dominant social pattern of a community. To tackle the decay of urban settlements, Geddes proposed a method that he called ‘conservative surgery’, which proposed minimum demolition and disruption to achieve maximum improvement in the city. But Geddes was no isolationist. Keeping in line with the ‘Outlook Tower’ that he established in Edinburgh in 1892 (in which a visitor started with familiar scenes of his own city and finished with the global viewpoint of a citizen of the world), Geddes proposed a holistic form of planning to connect the city, the nation and the international.

4 Beyond the nation?--The transnational and its limits. In the First World War, Geddes was aware that large scale demolition would lead to business losses and dislocation for the entire labouring population. While Geddes always expressed caution about demolition, he was practical enough to realize that in some areas there was no alternative. Geddes believed that demolition of certain areas did not mean that he abandoned his pet method of conservative surgery. He believed that residential areas could be improved by demolishing individual unsanitary houses instead of whole blocks. The spaces created could be converted into small open areas and parks, and provide much-needed leisure to the local residents. Geddes wanted more investment in the existing housing stock. Too often, he urged, buildings were judged on superficial grounds, “so that dirty whitewash, broken plaster, and bad smell are enough to evoke a cry for demolition; for only those need easy cleansing and brightening, and economical repair”.

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