

The making of the *mokam*: 'Relations of exchange' in railway trading stations, Eastern India c.1870-1914*

Saumyashree Ghosh, MPhil student, *Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta*

There is considerable realization in historiography that new wholesale marts along railway lines changed the commercial set up in nineteenth century rural India (Grover 1966; Bayly 1983). But the story of their making and everyday business remain largely unaddressed. Historians who acknowledge the significance of railway transportation in firming up indigenous circuits of exchange and commerce bypass the question of how they changed the organization of trade and finance (Ray, 1988; Ray, 1995). Set in the latter half of the nineteenth and over to the twentieth century, the paper will discuss the new configurations of markets and the morphology of a business landscape the railways brought about in Eastern India.

Central to its making were the railway trading stations. The term 'mokam' in Bengali is derived from the Arabic 'maqam'. 'Mokam' means 'station', particularly 'trading station', and comes from my chief informants – the Saha, Tili, and the Marwari merchants. By 1914, these trading sites had emerged as one of the most secure footholds of these indigenous merchant communities from which would later emerge some of the prominent industrialists and bankers. The paper will particularly enquire into the 'making' of these marts and how it underscores a trajectory of growing, resilient merchant

* The paper is drawn from my MPhil dissertation which I am about to submit, on June 25, at *The Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta*. **Please do not cite/circulate this**. This is only an extended abstract and does not include detailed footnotes. The arguments too are tentative at certain levels which I intend to substantiate in my later research.

capital during the period under consideration. Referring to the railway station as the new site and sector of the economy, the paper will explore the interactions between two formidable domains of capital – railway capital and commercial capital. The discussion shall draw on this dialogue by examining a visible social nexus at the ground and a fine, invisible financial nexus which complicates the prevalent notion of the hundi (bills of exchange)-and-arhat (commission-agent) bound ‘bazaar’ over the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.

The congested network of railway trading stations was however a phenomenon of the suburbia or the mofussil. In the first part of the paper I will argue that it was the informal nexus of the ‘mahajan’ (financier) and the Station Master which help explain the creation of these marts and the business dealings therein. This relation and its contradictions controlled the business of conveying and trading railway freight and the consequent layout of its geography. Railway stations in the colony were intended as staunch forums of the colonial state with the station men as conduits of information and revenue. But most of these stations emerged in the shadow of 1857 rebellion, in a context where the Empire had resolved to leave the ‘feudal order’ of Indian society largely undisturbed. The stations emerged as little hubs of country life with their local social hierarchies and informal relations with the neighbourhood. This was particularly important for forging indigenous nodes of business along these stations; the Station Masters who were largely Indians functioned as vital intermediaries. As a man in charge of the station, his not only held the sinews of disciplinary and supervisory authority over the station space and station accounts, but exercised a dynamic complex of command over handling of goods and recruitment of coolies. This position was further consolidated by the patronage they extended to the commercial classes, especially the mahajans. He had to be paid a handsome amount without which he refused to receive or despatch goods by the trains. Present in official records as an illegal intermediary or ‘dalal’ of the mahajan, to be later formalised by the colonial state as the ‘freight-broker’, the paper will draw on the details of a

particular case from 1873 and discuss how the Station Master as a significant commission-agent safely imbricated the railroads within the fine webs of commercial capital. The paper in that connection will engage with the knotty question of the reach and limits of the colonial state in the everyday market dealings in these marts, especially with respect to a new form of authority at the railway stations – the new rural-urban interface in the colonial society.

However, since talking of the railway mart reaches the limits of the colonial archive, with the many ‘illegal’ allies between the government/station officials and the mahajans, the paper takes a contemporary mahajan treatise to understand the importance of the mahajan-Station Master nexus. When read against the grain, such native economic agents on the ground open up another interface which help us understand how the everyday business in these marts was facilitated – the interface between freight-receipts of the railways and the risk-notes of the merchants. The second part of the paper will discuss this financial nexus. However, the tools of commerce which the railways introduced in colonial India did not always have clarity of legal status. In the nineteenth century and over to the twentieth, atleast until the War, the railways did not operate as insurers of goods it carried. As a result, indigenous commerce by the railroads was largely conducted under great risks but were also considerably reduced by the risk-notes, issued to the merchants at lower freight-rates, which enormously boosted the bazaar transactions. I will argue that this was an intended move by the colonial state which allowed trade in risks and speculation in the market for generating increasing returns on the railways, and ensured it by allowing a lower premium or a lower freight rate to the trader. On similar grounds, the trader or the mahajan was allowed to forge private arrangements with the station agents, most prominently the Station Master or the authorized local freight-broker in the intermediary trading stations who worked best to suit the needs of the railway companies’ clients.

The presentation will revolve around the story of the two interlinked linkages (social and financial) in the bazaar economy. The paper will close on what the mediation of this nexus at the railway trading stations – between the interior markets and the sea-board – tells us about the strength of the ‘bazaar capital’ (Ray, 1988). For the bazaar expanded and its accumulated capital grew to notable proportions because of the railroads and yet it figures in dominant interpretations as an ‘unorganized’ sector which could not be regulated by European capital and even where it did, it did so ‘only too imperfectly’.