

Revisiting the Calcutta Improvement Trust in early 20th Century Calcutta

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Even though Calcutta ceased to be the capital of the British Indian Empire in 1911, it still continued to be an important administrative and economic centre and port city of British India. During and after the First World War, the city was subjected to forces of economic depression, political devolution and migration that in turn led to changes in configurations of urban space and forms of built environments, conceptions of urban governance and the provision of urban services. As a colonial space, Calcutta continued to be the very 'other' of the Western cities, but the exigencies of health and improvement pushed the civic planners working in Calcutta to transcend the boundaries of nation and embrace the transnational.

E.P. Richards and slum repair

In 1911, the Government of Bengal created the Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) to improve conditions in Calcutta. It was created as an independent entity, headed by a British Indian Civil Service official – Cecil Henry Bompas. Its objectives were to open up congested areas, construct or alter roads, provide ventilation through open spaces, construct new buildings, acquire land for urban development, and rehabilitate displaced communities. The immediate cause was a pandemic that spread from the interior of China after 1894 to the ports of Asia and Africa, killing an estimated seven million people by 1914. A civil engineer named E.P. Richards was given the task to create the working constitution of the CIT.

Richards had moved to British India in 1908 and become the executive engineer of Madras Main Drainage. In September 1912, Richards became chief engineer of the CIT. He drew extensively from various town planning projects in Europe and America for his report on Calcutta, which he finished and published in 1914. He included a sociological map, colour coded by land use, and material on Italian and German approaches to city planning.¹ Richards was much influenced by Georges-Eugène Haussmann's planning of Paris (France), and sought to apply his methods of circulation and ventilation while structuring a road-building plan for Calcutta. Drawing on the working-class housing operations of Birmingham (England), and suburban development programmes of Letchworth (England) and Milan (Italy), Richards tried to build upon such programmes to tackle the growing problems of overcrowding, congestion and filth in the city.

Early twentieth century India has predominantly been studied as a time of colonial domination and anti-colonial nationalist struggle. However, it was also a period when India was drawn into two World Wars and subjected to the uncertainties of the global economy. The nationalist struggle precipitated questions about national poverty, the welfare of the poor, and the legitimacy of the colonial government. Such political contestations took cues from transnational imaginings of what modern governance was and what it should do – thoughts that even penetrated certain ranks of colonial officialdom. This paper looks at how the city of Calcutta became a site of this trans-national (urban) imagination.

In his 1914 report, Richards put great emphasis on low income housing and suburban development as a necessity in urban government, favouring the method of 'slum repair' or 'slum mending' already in use in British cities. Remedy by slum repair required (persuading) owners to make their property sanitary and habitable, whilst the municipal authority would remove obstructive buildings in a judicious and inexpensive manner in order to open up congested spaces. Richards visited the city of Birmingham in 1912-1914 to gain first-hand knowledge of the experiment. He was received by Dr John Robertson, the Health Officer of the city. Accompanied by Robertson, Richards inspected a considerable area of 'reformed' courts and slums. According to Richards, the effect of removing obstructive buildings; opening up one or both ends of courts to the nearest street; enforcing repair of the property; paving the surfaces of yards and open spaces; providing excellent and durable but cheap washhouses and up-to-date water closets; and planting trees and putting light ornamental railings and gates to prevent ingress of vehicular traffic on to the paving, was most striking and pleasing and produced a highly satisfactory living environment. Richards was especially impressed by the healthy, bright and clean appearance of the children and women, and by the freshness of air and abundance of light in the reformed areas.²

Another way in which Richards sought to ease demographic pressure and bring cleanliness, health and order to Calcutta was to create good communication channels to the suburbs. Richards drew inspiration from the garden city movement and was in favour of setting apart definite areas for suburban development as done in Milan and Genoa.³ He was aware that compared with those of Western cities, slums in Calcutta were very many times more extensive. Overcrowding in Calcutta slums was much greater than European slums. Slums in Calcutta had the highest recorded mortality for tuberculosis and infant mortality and the highest infantile death rate in the world.

Richards determined the reason behind the origin of Calcutta slums was mostly twofold. Firstly, there was a lack of efficient byelaws

and their rigid enforcement both in the past and present. Secondly, the lack of main roads for rapid transit to external areas, and lack of suburban land preparation, forced people of meagre incomes to crowd within the slums of Calcutta.⁴

Patrick Geddes and folk planning

While Richards was drawing upon more concrete examples of town planning schemes from the Western world, Patrick Geddes, a Scottish sociologist and town planner, who produced several reports on Indian towns, believed that town planning was actually 'folk planning'. In 1918, he undertook a survey for CIT and forwarded a planning scheme for a particular neighbourhood (Barra Bazar) 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 and destroyed 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 invented 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, connecting the city, the nation and the international.

Writing just after the First World War, Geddes was aware that large scale demolition would lead to business losses and dislocation for the entire labouring population.⁵ While Geddes always expressed caution about demolition, he was practical enough to realize that in some areas there was no alternative. Geddes' support for 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 relief 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 these only need easy cleansing and brightening, and economical repair".⁶ He suggested that, in its own way, the Calcutta Municipality could take a step forward and grant loans to citizens for repairing their houses. Geddes felt that investment in housing was too strictly seen through the prism of financial gains and losses in the market. He wanted the governing classes to invest in housing so that, socially at least, they could expect returns in the form of

a satisfied and prosperous working class.

Neither Richards nor Geddes was ignorant of the relation between overcrowding and urban poverty in early twentieth century Calcutta. 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.⁷

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 the opportunity to profit from reselling 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 urban development with the development of its citizen body, the Trust linked development to profit based on material infrastructure and divested from society itself.

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Notes

- 1 Home, R. 2016. 'British colonial civic improvement in the early twentieth century: E. P. Richards in Madras, Calcutta, and Singapore', *Planning Perspectives* 31(4):635-644, p.638.
- 2 Richards, E.P. 2014. *The Condition, Improvement and Town Planning of the City of Calcutta and Contiguous Areas: The Richards Report*. Routledge, p.328.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp.360-361.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.30.
- 5 Datta, P. 2012. *Planning the City: Urbanisation and Reform in Calcutta 1800-1940*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, pp.257-258.
- 6 Geddes, P. 1919. *Barra Bazar Improvement: A Report by Patrick Geddes*, p.33.
- 7 For further discussion on colonial governmentality see Legg, S. 2007. *Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi's Urban Governmentalities*. Blackwell Publishing.



Above: 'Jagannath Ghat Road Construction' (Annual Report of CIT, 1929). Courtesy: British Library.