

Class and Tenancy Relations in Calcutta, 1914-1926

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Abstract: *In this paper, we will track the life of a street in the archives of Calcutta, during the time of the First World War and its immediate aftermath. We will show how such an exercise gives us an introduction to the rental geography of a city. In the period under review, an ambitious street scheme of the Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) recycled more than 200 acres of prime land of the city, and dis-housed at least 50000 individuals living in densely populated neighbourhoods of Surtibagan, Jorabagan, Jorasanko, etc,—where upper caste Bengali Hindu rentier class population lived with an increasingly prosperous Marwari community, a lower-middle class Bengali constituency, an up-country Muslim trading community, and a huge mass of migrant (male) working class population working in Barabazar area, mostly as coolies and transport workers. The Central Avenue Scheme of the CIT in this area created a speculative land market and reshuffled the ethnic distribution of property-ownership and tenancy. This paper seeks to take a ‘micro-history’ approach to study this transformation in Calcutta. The paper introduces a set of ‘new’ archival records to the study of the political economy of Indian cities in the 20th century.*

Introduction

This paper attempts a micro history of land speculation and rental economy of Calcutta during the First World War and its immediate aftermath. The period under review is sandwiched between the nineteenth century traditions of urbanism,¹ and the twentieth century narratives of mass political formation in urban centres,² and thus it has remained largely unattended by historians despite the fact that the First World War had a significant global impact on the urban land market and tenancy relations.³ The existing scholarship on South Asian cities tend to be concentrated on two very distinct themes. While, one strand of scholarship deals with the urban history of colonial cities focusing mostly on the developments of nineteenth century, the other remains focused on the urbanization and urban issues post the 1990s.⁴ The urban history of twentieth century South Asia is something that has received comparatively less scholarly attention over the years and it is imperative that this gulf between the two vast temporalities, be bridged for a holistic understanding of the South Asian city space. The problem was briefly addressed by Douglas. E. Haynes and

¹ K. M. Sengupta, *Planned Spaces, Intimate Places: Ordering a City and Creating a Neighbourhood in Colonial Calcutta*, PhD Dissertation, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2013.

² See Rajat. K. Ray, *Urban Roots of Indian Nationalism: Pressure Groups and Conflicts in Calcutta City Politics, 1875-1939*, New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1979. Also see C. A. Bayly, *Local Control in Indian Towns—the Case of Allahabad 1880-1920*, *Modern Asian Studies*, 4, 1971, and P. Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press.

³ H. Forsell, *Property, Tenancy and Urban Growth in Stockholm and Berlin, 1860-1920*, Burlington, Ashgate. R. M. Fogelson, *The Great Rent Wars: New York, 1917-1929*, New Haven, Yale University Press. Also see D. Bhattacharyya, *Interwar Housing Speculation and Rent Profiteering in Colonial Calcutta*, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 36, 3, 2016, 465-482.

⁴ P. Kidambi, *Review of, House But No Garden: Apartment Living in Bombay Suburbs 1898-1964* *The American Historical Review* Volume 119, Issue 3, June 2014.

Nikhil Rao⁵ where they pontificated the distinct lack of scholarly works from the period between 1920-1970. They have argued that since many of the works that focus on the nineteenth century (and some early twentieth century) urbanization of the subcontinent keep the “the colonial context and colonial relations of power” central to their inquiry, the contribution of these works offer limited scope in understanding the “the formation of the contours of the contemporary South Asian city.”⁶ While Haynes and Rao demonstrate the lack of scholarly endeavour in documenting the urban transformation between 1920-1970, much is the same even for the first two decades of the twentieth century. A plethora of titles that conclude in the early twentieth century, typically ends their interrogation by the First World War (a fact Haynes and Rao recognizes in the context of the works on the urban middle class)⁷. It is bewildering how the impact of the First World War on the land market of South Asia and its overall urbanization has not received due scholarly attention. However, recently scholars have started giving importance to the history of the period and a pithy but engaging historiography can now be located.

The history of the period under consideration (at least in the colonial metropolises) were dominated by the development of the ‘Improvement Trust’. Prashant Kidambi notes,

The idea of an ‘Improvement Trust’ was influenced by town-planning experiments that had been carried out in England and Scotland during the nineteenth century. Such experiments, which went under the name of ‘Improvement Schemes’, had two salient features. First, these were legal instruments ‘sanctioned by Parliament through a long succession of private legislation’. The aim of this legislation was ‘to permit some publicly incorporated authority—such as a land development company or a municipal corporation or an improvement commission—to usurp private property rights in the name of some larger collective interest’. Second, such Improvement Schemes also embodied a ‘physical-planning concept’ and their central powers were ‘clearance powers’. The right to acquire property entailed ‘a right of demolition and, and along with that, a right of redevelopment’.⁸

The improvement trusts played a crucial role in the reshaping of the city space in the initial decades of the twentieth century. In Bombay, for instance as Nikhil Rao demonstrates, the Bombay Improvement Trust (BIT), following the panic of the plague was responsible for acquiring lands in the outskirts of the city which paved the way for the development of the land market in Bombay.⁹ Though more often than not the BIT and its schemes created more problems instead of solving the ones it was assigned. Prashant Kidambi has dexterously documented how the schemes of the Trust led to a shortage of land in Bombay, and the consequences of the erroneous valuation models that were borne by the poorer section of the society.¹⁰ However, the inquiry into the workings of the Improvement Trusts and their role in the urbanization in the subcontinent

⁵D. E. Haynes and N. Rao, *Beyond the Colonial City: Re-Evaluating the Urban History of India, ca. 1920–1970, South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, September 2013,

36:3, 317-335

⁶ *Ibid.* 320

⁷ *Ibid.* 321

⁸ P. Kidambi, *Housing the Poor in a Colonial City, The Bombay Improvement Trust*

⁹ N.I Rao, *House but No Garden: Apartment Living in Bombay’s Suburbs, 1898-1964*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

¹⁰ P Kidambi, *Housing the Poor*, pp 60-63

has largely been limited to Bombay and to some extent Delhi¹¹. In the context of Calcutta, though the Improvement Trust played a significant role in the urban restructuring in the twentieth century, it has not featured significantly in the urban historiography of the city. This is mostly because of the larger problematic insinuated above about the over bearing importance that the nineteenth century is given in urban historiography. The few works¹² that briefly mention the formation and the workings of the of the C.I.T treat it as a culmination of the urban formations of Calcutta that started from the era of Wellesley. In addition, the archives that are hitherto used while writing about C.I.T are mostly based on the few annual reports that were publicly accessible. The other notable documents of the Trust like the land committee reports, schemes, valuation documents, proceedings of the meetings have all remained out of the public domain until now. Thus, this work attempts to fill up this historiographical lacuna by delving into a completely unexplored archive, and builds an argument from within that archive.

In this paper, we hope to address this research gap. In what follows, we will first track the life of a street in the archives of the CIT¹³—an executive driven statutory organization set up in 1912 to re-plan and re-cycle parts of the city, and to execute suburban developments outside the command of a fast democratizing sphere of representative politics of the city Corporation. We will show how such an exercise gives us an introduction to the rental geography of Calcutta. We will then follow a major War time initiative of rent control to talk about a possible history of urban tenancy relations, which has so far received less attention in urban historiography.

Section I

The Infrastructural Inheritance of the CIT

In 1803, Lord Wellesley appointed an ‘Improvement Committee’ to bring ‘order’ to the city of Calcutta. Among other things, the Committee was entrusted to ‘ensure that the irregularity of buildings should be forbidden and that streets and lanes, which have hitherto been formed without attention to the health, convenience or safety of the inhabitants, should henceforth be constructed with order and system’.¹⁴ The financial supply for the Committee’s operation came from the lottery profits. In 1817, the Improvement Committee was incorporated into the Lottery Committee, which continued to be in operation until 1836. The Lottery Committee was responsible for developing a road network in the city. The Committee developed five North and South Roads, known as Cornwallis Street, College Street, Wellington Street, Wellesley Street and Wood Street. Further, it constructed Strand Road along the river bank. It also laid out Free School Street, Kyd Street, Colootolah Street, Amherst Street and Mirzapore Street. The Committee created Cornwallis Square, College Square, Wellington Square and Wellesley Square.¹⁵

¹¹ For a discussion on the formation and workings of the Delhi Improvement Trust see, S. Legg *Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi’s Urban Governmentalities*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2007, Chapter four.

¹² See P Datta, *Planning the City*, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012 and Samita Gupta (Citation ta thik janina, tumi jeta bolechile sheta likhechi)

¹³For an institutional history and the operation of the CIT in the first half of the twentieth century, see P. Datta, *Calcutta on the Threshold of the 1940s*, in T. Sarkar and S. Bandyopadhyay (eds), *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, New Delhi, Social Science Press, 2015, 18-41.

¹⁴ E. P. Richards, *Calcutta Improvement Trust: Report by Request of the Trust on the Condition, Improvement and Town Planning of the City of Calcutta and Contiguous Areas*, Hertfordshire, Jennings, 1914, 16.

¹⁵ E. P. Richards, 1914, 16.

The Lottery Committee was abolished in 1836. As historians of the city suggest, for the next couple of decades, nothing significant took place in terms of street construction.¹⁶ The street development in the city proper began to receive attention only after the city was given a Municipal Corporation in 1856. The city Corporation undertook a massive underground drainage and a piped water supply scheme. The covering up of open drains and the laying of water connection to households enabled the Corporation to open out, widen and stretch several alleyways.¹⁷ In earlier times, many of these lanes abruptly ended in courtyards of private properties, and as such belonged to adjacent property owners. The inauguration of a new regime of municipal services enabled the colonial government to create lanes and to integrate the existing ones with a larger network of traffic. It was estimated that between 1876 and 1888, the surface area of streets in the city increased by 33 percent.¹⁸ These lanes soon became the veritable means of traffic in city.



Source: J. Maden and A. B. Shorobree, 1913, *City and Suburban Main Road Project*, CIT, 26.
Image Title: 'A Typical Development Road in the North of the City'.

The only significant street building activity between 1856 and 1888 was the construction of a 70 feet wide Road, connecting the floating Hoogly Bridge (constructed in 1873-4) and the Sealdah Railway Station. In 1888, the jurisdiction of the Corporation was extended to incorporate a considerable area of suburbs to the East and South, and the municipal area was almost doubled from 11,954 acres to 20,547 acres. Since 1888, the Corporation began to pay attention to the city's communication with the recently added areas. But, its attention remained confined to the South. Thus, in 1890s, the Corporation built some of the major streets in the South—Lansdowne Road, Harish Chandra Mukherjee Road and Hazra Road. Still, the Corporation lacked an integrated approach. The developments of street networks in suburbs, on the other hand, did not follow the ongoing developments in the city proper, which eventually resulted in ruptures in traffic flows between the old city and the extended municipal areas. When CIT came into existence in 1912, it had the burden to integrate the city with its suburban areas, and thus disperse rental concentrations within some of the densely populated pockets of the old city.

When the Trust began its operation, its Chief Engineer E. P. Richards found another feature of streets in the city, which appeared to him to be unique, and therefore, undesirable:

¹⁶ P Datta, 2012.

¹⁷ E. P. Richards, 1914.

¹⁸ E. P. Richards 1914.

I know of no other city road-plan that closely resembles that of Calcutta. The square meshes made by the existing network of roads are, I believe, unique in their great size. The network of other big cities is [sic] composed of meshes very much smaller. Calcutta, when compared with the average great city, possesses an abnormally low proportion of real roads and streets per square mile. Instead of being served by main roads, the city is served by streets. used as main roads; and instead of the property masses being each served by their own lot of streets, they are provided only with highly irregular lanes and passages—that have to serve as streets. If Constantinople and some of the Chinese cities be excluded, it would be found, I think, that Calcutta contains a greater mileage of lanes and passages per square mile. than any other city in the world.¹⁹

Richards found Calcutta as a city ‘divided into huge half-mile rectangles by narrow streets’ in which ‘the maximum density of building and population concurs...with the least provision of roads and streets’.²⁰ He recommended the construction of a series of intersecting and parallel roads, along with a series of diagonal thoroughfares like that of the Harrison Road to reduce distance between streets, which, in turn, required him to propose a radical restructuring of the sociological map of the central parts of the city where slums and substantial residential buildings shared bleeding boundaries with thriving commercial establishments. This paper discusses the most prominent instance of street building along some of the city’s most densely populated wards and its social consequences.

The CIT developed two approaches to the improvement of the city. Firstly, 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). Secondly, it undertook a massive street scheme aiming at decongesting a large part of central Calcutta, and connected the city with its immediate suburbs. In 1927, C H Bompas, the founder chairman of the CIT observed that the former scheme could never take off, and that in the absence of a planned execution of more general projects, the street schemes played the most significant role in reorganizing some major parts of the city and suburbs in the initial decade. The street schemes acquired land beyond the requirement of laying a thoroughfare, and sold the excess land at a much higher price as a set-off to the cost of constructing the street. This was known as ‘recoupment’ which ‘formed a very important feature in the finance of the Improvement Trust’.²¹ In most of the street schemes in Calcutta, the Trust tried to follow E P Richard’s measurement method:

As an approximate average, the existing depth of the frontage property in Calcutta may be taken at 85 feet: and the acquisition width required to take in two lines of property, i.e., the frontage buildings, and parallel line behind them, may be taken as about 160 feet. Let the average widening be taken as 40 feet. Then if the acquisition depth averages 160 feet the new plots will average 120 feet.²²

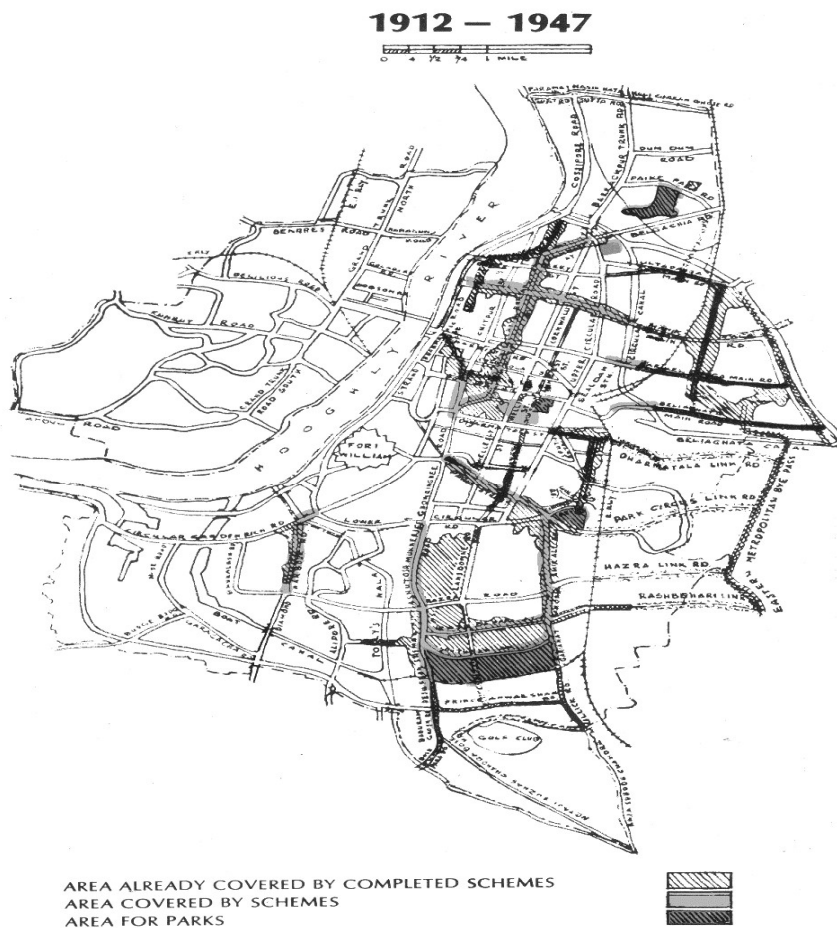
¹⁹ E. P. Richards, 1914, 19.

²⁰ E. P. Richards, 1914, 19.

²¹ C. H. Bompas, The Work of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, LXXV, 3864, 1927, 200-213.

²² E. P. Richards, *Calcutta Improvement Trust: Report by Request of the Trust on the Condition, Improvement and Town Planning of the City of Calcutta and Contiguous Areas*, Hertfordshire, Jennings, 1914, 165.

The method of recoupment organized properties in grids, and in a hierarchy of valuation. The coordinated operation of the Trust, the Corporation, the Port Trust, and the PWD in 1910s and 1920s brought about a decisive change in the material culture of Calcutta. In those two decades, Calcutta got several avenue style streets paved with asphalt with spacious sidewalks. The elevated architectural pattern of these avenues produced new asymmetries between the heights of the low-profile lanes (*gali*) and the high-profile streets (*rajpath*), which impacted on the circulation of water in the city. The low-profile lanes became the new sites of water logging and diseases. The bright street lamps on the main streets enabled the sprawl of new forms of darkness and new geographies of illegibility in the network of lanes where thrived the lower middle class clerkly life. The avenue created a new aesthetic order and diverted civic infrastructural investments to new zones of concentration. The avenue also created a moral order. A person's elevation from poverty and squalor to enlightenment would involve a spatio-moral journey from the lane to the street (*gali theke rajpath*).²³ The figure below gives us a brief sketch of the work of the CIT between 1912 and 1947.

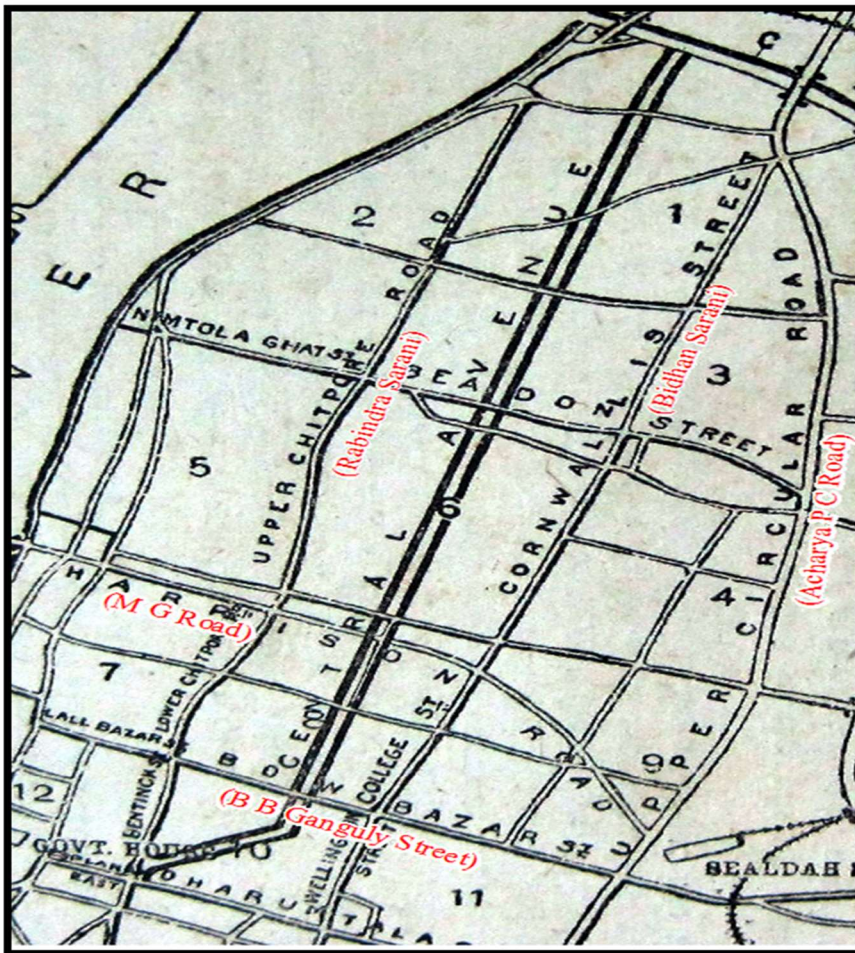


²³ Literary works in Bangla developed a distinct urban form in the interwar period. This tradition continued in subsequent decades during and following the Second World War and Partition. Literary works of these decades were especially invested in describing the life of the numerous blighted *galis* of Calcutta. See B. Mitra, *Sahib Bibi Golam*, Calcutta, New Age, 1952, reprint 1970. Also, see S. Ghose, *Madhubansir Gali*, Kolkata, Mitra o Ghose Publishers, 1950. B. Kar, *Deoyal*, Kolkata D. M. Library, 1957. For a vivid description of the *Rajpath* (built by the CIT), see Buddhadeb Basu, *Amar Jauban*, Kolkata, M. C. Sarkar & Sons,

Source: Partho Datta 2015, 19.

Section II The Central Avenue Scheme

The idea of a north-south central thoroughfare between the Chitpore Road and the Cornwallis Street had been under consideration since at least 1854 when Alderman Clarke, the architect of the city's underground sewerage system, projected a thoroughfare linking up Dharmatala and Bagbazar. In 1856, a small section, 1/3 of a mile in length, extending between Machuabazar Street and Kalootola Street was completed, and was given the name 'Halliday Street'.²⁴In 1914, the CIT took up the 'Central Avenue' project. It began by destroying a host of dwellings and shops in the corner of the Dharmatala and Bentinck Street. Chairman Bompas took personal care to ensure that the contrasting grandeur of the Tipoo Sultan Mosque and the Ochterlony Monument gained an unencumbered visibility within a single photo frame from the cleansed street corner. By 1931, the Central Avenue touched Beadon Street in the north in 1931. When completed, it covered 201.1 acres of prime land stretching over 3 miles with a consistent width of 100 feet. The Chief Valuer of the Trust, Mr. Shrobbree noted in 1927 that 'the great Central Avenue has broken through the clotted mass of buildings which was North-and-Indian-Calcutta, and joined up with the broad avenues of the South City'²⁵.



²⁴ T. Emerson, The Central Avenue: Calcutta's New Thoroughfare, Bengal Past and Present, XXVII, Part 1, 53, 1924, 70-74.

²⁵ Quoted in P. Datta, Calcutta on the Threshold, 24.

Source: *Bengal Past and Present*, 1916, 72. Note: The present names of some of the major streets have been indicated.

The Central Avenue swallowed smaller by-lanes and neighbourhoods, and adorned its immediate margins with vertical buildings hosting commercial offices and banks. The adjacent residential quarters were recouped and redeveloped to host commercial establishments which led to a substantial de-population in adjacent neighbourhoods. In Kalootola area for instance, which was in the active catchment of the Scheme, population density declined by 32.5 percent between 1911 and 1921, while Jorasanko witnessed a decline of population density by 3.2 percent during the same census decade. In these two neighbourhoods alone, the Central Avenue Scheme acquired 33.3 and 22.6 acres of land respectively.²⁶ In a way, the Central Avenue Scheme carried forward a long process of dis-housing *bustee* populations comprised mainly of male migrants from Bihar and United Provinces. Already, the Census of 1911 noted that due to the demolition of 75 *bustees* in the Kalootola area alone, the population density came down from 282 per acre in 1901 to 255 in 1911,²⁷ and to 172 per acre in 1921²⁸. The Census of 1911 further registered that in Jorabagan, Jorasanko and Kalootola areas, dwelling houses had increasingly been replaced by the commercial quarters²⁹—a trend that still continues in inner-city areas. We will have more to say on this in the subsequent sections of the paper.



View of the scheme site, before clearance began, taken from Dharmatala Street looking eastward.

Source: CIT Archives, 1914.

²⁶ Census of India, 1921, Vol. VI, City of Calcutta, Part I, Report.

²⁷ Census of India, 1911, Vol. VI, City of Calcutta, Part I, Report.

²⁸ Census of India, 1921, Vol. VI, City of Calcutta, Part I, Report.

²⁹ Census of India, 1911, Vol. VI, City of Calcutta, Part I, Report.



SCHEME VIII—CENTRAL AVENUE & BENTINCK STREET.

Source: Annual Report of the CIT, 1922.



Central Avenue between Beadon Street to Gray Street, 1922, Source: CIT Archive



Source: Annual Report of CIT, 1935

Let us now present a picture of the Central Avenue Scheme.

An estimate of 1918 mentioned that 136 residential properties were being notified for acquisition for the Central Avenue Scheme. Of the 136 properties, 12 were 1 *kottah* in area. These properties were priced in the prevailing market rate between Rs. 2000 (417 Pound) and 5000 (1042 Pound), the average being Rs. 3500 (729 Pound). Next, there were 53 holdings with an area between 1 and 2 *kottahs* each with an estimated prevailing market rate between Rs. 3000 and 15000, the average being Rs. 6000. Between 2 and 3 *kottahs* in area, there were 33 holdings whose price varied between Rs. 5000 and Rs. 18500, the average being Rs. 11000. The remaining 38 holdings were over 3 *kottahs* in area of which three properties were priced under Rs. 10000 and 9 between Rs. 10000 and Rs. 15000. Many of these properties were partly tenanted, and most of the 136 properties had numerous ownership sub-divisions.³⁰

How could the evicted people be rehoused? Bompas summarily excluded the possibility of recognizing tenants of the acquired properties. In one of his notes, Bompas clearly mentioned that the overall improvement of the land due to its proximity to the new thoroughfare would make the price of land in this area several times higher than the existing street-less, partitioned mesh of properties. He said, 'it is obviously desirable that building of some size and dignity should front on such a road. It would have been ridiculous for Haussmann when he made the Boulevards of

³⁰Note by Chairman (C. H. Bompas) of the Calcutta Improvement Trust on Re-Instatement in Scheme, No. VII, Attached to the Proceedings of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, Meeting No. 307, 4 September, 1918.

Paris to have allowed them to be lined with small cottages'.³¹ Bompas added, 'the only way of re-housing in these cases at a fair expenditure seems to be to compel the people, however reluctant, to move into the suburbs where land is cheaper'.³² An alternative view of rehousing the affected lower-middle class households under the Central Avenue Scheme came from Sir Francis Stewart and C E Payne (the Chairman of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation), who suggested that the *bustee* lands in the inner city neighbourhoods could be vacated and recycled for the reinstatement of the scheme affected dwellers of masonry buildings, and that the *bustee* 'being dealt with under re-housing schemes near the outskirts of the town'.³³ As we progress with this paper, we will explore why such a vision of dispersal could not materialize in Calcutta in the first couple of decades of the 20th century.

It appears from the above discussion that even after 6 years of its operation, in 1918 the Trust did not have a clear sense of a re-housing scheme for the dis-housed population. In the absence of a sound re-housing scheme, the lower middle-class owners had to accept unfavourable terms of tenancy predominantly in the Central Avenue area. Only one well-to-do owner evacuated to Bhowanipore accepting CIT's terms of compensation.³⁴ To encourage the affected owners of the Central Avenue Scheme to move to Bhowanipore, the Trust, in September, 1918, announced a concession scheme that was 'either 33.3 percent of the value of the new site, or 50 percent of the value of the old site'.³⁵ A notice was issued to small house owners whose residences were acquired in the Central Avenue Scheme:

The Improvement Trust is willing to assist the owners of small residential houses which have been acquired to obtain new building sites on land which is the property of the Trust. At present the only land available is in Bhowanipore. The Trust in such cases will, wherever possible, sell a suitable site and the whole or part of the purchase money may be left outstanding on mortgage at 5 percent interest, or if the purchaser prefers, he may pay 7 percent per annum for 30 years at the end of which time he will obtain the freehold without further payment... The Trust is prepared to make a deduction from the estimated full value of the land in such cases.³⁶

³¹Note by Chairman (C. H. Bompas) of the Calcutta Improvement Trust on Re-Instatement in Scheme, No. VII, Attached to the Proceedings of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, Meeting No. 307, 4 September, 1918.

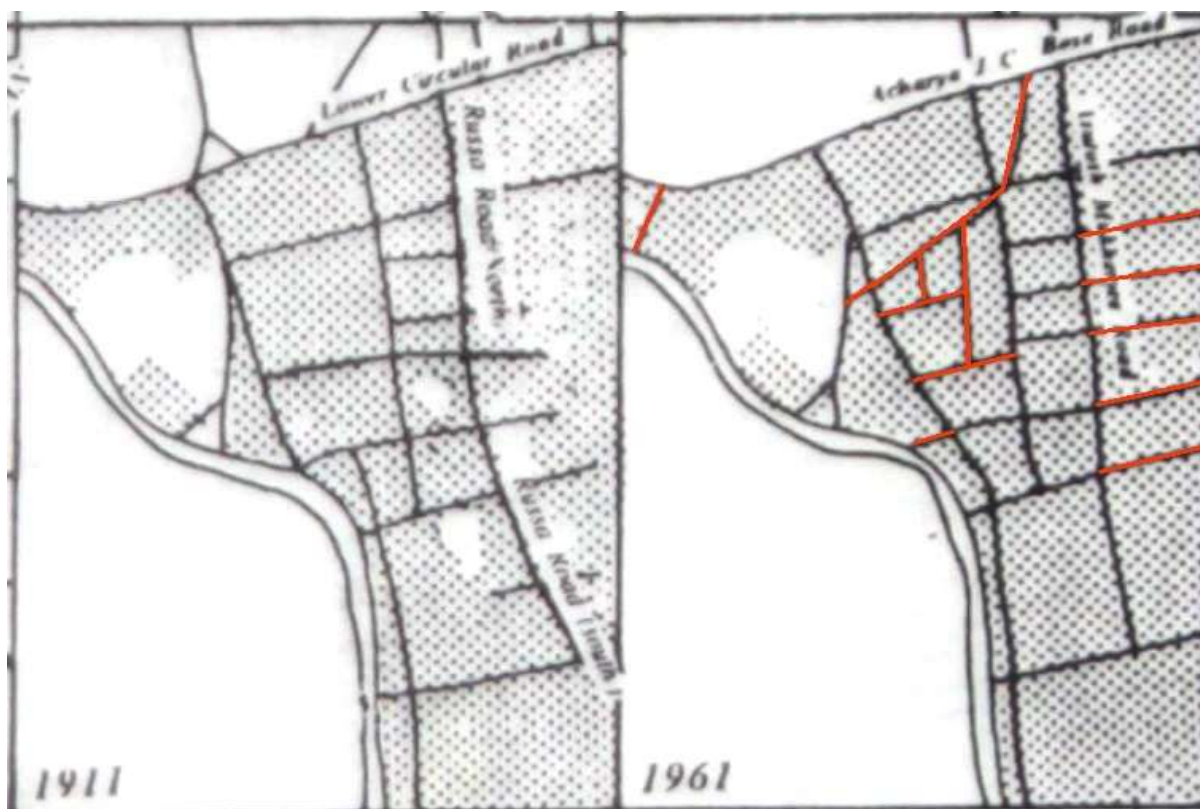
³²Note by Chairman (C. H. Bompas) of the Calcutta Improvement Trust on Re-Instatement in Scheme, No. VII, Attached to the Proceedings of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, Meeting No. 307, 4 September, 1918.

³³Proceedings of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, Meeting No. 307, 4 September, 1918, p. 2,3.

³⁴Chairman's (C. H. Bompas') Report on Re-Statement, Attached to the Proceedings of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, Meeting No. 297, 8 July, 1918, pp. 4-7.

³⁵Proceedings of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, Meeting No. 307, 4 September, 1918, p. 3.

³⁶Annual Report, 1920-1921, pp. 21-22.



Bhowanipore in 1911 and in 1961: Map extrapolated from K. Dasgupta, 2003, Genesis of A Neighbourhood: The Mapping of Bhabanipore, CSSSC Working Paper No. 175. Note: The red lines indicate the new streets that the CIT built between 1912 and 1961.

The following Table illustrates the state of re-instatement for small *bhadrlok* owners in 1921:³⁷

Scheme from which displaced	Number of cases	Scheme in which re-housed
I: Surtibagan	1	I: Surtibagan
I: Do	5	V: Bhowanipore Area
IB: Link Road between Chitpore Road and Central Avenue, Surtibagan	1	IB: Link Road between Chitpore Road and Central Avenue, Surtibagan
IC: Surtibagan area	1	IV A: Russa Road Extension
IV: Russa Road Widening	2	V: Bhowanipore Area
IV: Do	1	IV A: Russa Road Extension
IV A: Russa Road Extension	12	IV A: Do
IV A: Do	2	V: Bhowanipore Area
V: Bhowanipore Area	9	IV A: Russa Road Extension
V: Do	12	V: Bhowanipore Area
VII: Central Avenue (between Mechuabazaar Street and Beadon Street)	2	IV A: Russa Road Extension
VII: Do	24	V: Bhowanipore Area

³⁷ Annual Report, 1920-1921, p. 22. Note: Scheme names corresponding to the numbers are not given in the original table.

VII: Central Avenue (between Mechuabazaar Street and Beadon Street)	3	VII: Central Avenue (between Mechuabazaar Street and Beadon Street)
VII: Do	1	VII B: Central Avenue (between Kalootola Street and Bowbazar Street)
VII A: Central Avenue (Halliday Street Widening)	2	V: Bhowanipore Area
VII A: Do	3	VII B: Central Avenue (between Kalootola Street and Bowbazar Street)
VII B: Central Avenue (between Kalootola Street and Bowbazar Street)	3	V: Bhowanipore Area
VII B: Do	2	VII B: Central Avenue (between Kalootola Street and Bowbazar Street)
VII C: Maniktola Spur	5	IV A: Russa Road Extension
VII C: Do	6	V: Bhowanipore Area
VII C. S. (Chitpore Spur)	1	XIII: Park Street Widening (between Chowringhee and Wellesley Street)
VII C. S. : Do	4	VII C. S. (Chitpore Spur)
VII C. S. Do	2	VII B: Central Avenue (between Kalootola Street and Bowbazaar Street)
VII C. S. Do	1	IA: Surtibagan
VII D: Central Avenue (between Bowbazaar Street and Princep Street)	1	V: Bhowanipore Area
VII: Central Avenue (between Mechuabazaar Street and Beadon Street)	1	V: Bhowanipore Area
R. K. D. S. Square	1	IV A: Russa Road Extension
R. K. D. S. Square	1	V: Bhowanipore Area
	Total: 109	

The Table reports that out of total 109 cases of re-housing, 61 cases (56 percent) came from the Central Avenue area, of which 15 house owners (24.56 percent) could find an alternative offer in within the Central Avenue area. An overwhelming number of displaced owners (38 of 61, which was 62 percent) moved to the emerging suburb of Bowanipore. Thus, the Trust's Annual Report for 1920-21 noted an 'increasing tendency for the people displaced in the centre of the town to avail themselves of what may be called the natural form of re-housing by moving to the improved area of completed schemes in the suburbs'³⁸. It is important to add that the table gives the information of re-housing of only a tiny section of those displaced during this period. The question of ownership in such old residential buildings tended to be more complex and contested as each old house being destroyed involved multiple claims to ownership and tenancy. In addition, out of 136 properties notified for acquisition along the emerging Central Avenue, the table gives us an idea of just 61 (45 percent) owners who moved out, which shows a tendency to officially under-

³⁸ Annual Report, 1920-21, p. 22.

report the effect of improvement among the people displaced during the first decade of the Trust's operation.

The re-housing scheme of the Trust for the workmen during the period under review was effectively confined to three, three storied tenements building with 248 rooms and 4 shops capable of housing just '1, 260 adults, allowing 300 cubic feet of space to each person'³⁹. In this scheme, each room was to be rented to 4/5 individuals at 5/6 rupees per month. For long, these *chawls* remained vacant. The dis-housed slum dwellers refused to move far away from their places of work, and those who moved, refused to be re-housed against gravitation. They appeared to be more comfortable to 'crossing the canal and going a little farther afield where land is comparatively cheap and where they can live in the same kind of huts to which they are accustomed, and secure greater privacy'⁴⁰. After a while, the Trust opened the scheme to other social classes to attract people from the lower middle-class background to occupy the available rooms in the building. The occupancy record of this building between 30 June 1918 and 30 March 1920 shows that the building was never fully occupied, and that only in September 1918, June 1919, December 1919 and March 1920, the number of occupied rooms in the building reached or crossed the 240 mark.⁴¹ Soon, the Trust received an application from one Nirmal Chandra Mitter, who was 'ready to offer Rs. 750 a month for the three blocks for a twenty-year lease. Mitter wished to take the two upper floors of the three blocks for the occupation of middle class Bengalis but *only*, it needs emphasis, if a gate were put on the staircases and he would then leave the Trust free to lease the ground floors to whomever they liked'. The fact that the Trust entertained such an application reveals its approach to the housing question as one being couched less in a motive of rehabilitation than perhaps a motive of commerce. In 1920, the Trust accepted that the 'occupants are not persons of the poorest class', and noticed a 'growing tendency for the buildings to become occupied by clerks and poor students who have not been actually displaced by the operations of the Trust'.⁴² Soon, the Trust decided to use parts of the three buildings (Blocks A, B and C) for commercial purposes. Thus, the Annual Report for 1920-21 shows the 'conversion of two ground floor dwelling rooms in Block "A" into shops and another two rooms on the top flat into restaurants and also a third top flat room in Block "C" into a restaurant'⁴³.

The Trust's approach to the question of rehousing and compensation led to discontent even within the high circles of the colonial government. In his letters on 31 May, 1919, the Secretary to the Government of Bengal wrote:

I am to add that Government are disposed to think that the Board of Trustees have not hitherto made adequate use of the power to execute re-housing schemes conferred on them by the [Calcutta Improvement] Act with the consequence that one of its main objects has not been fulfilled, and I am to suggest for their consideration the desirability of a more active policy in this direction. ⁴⁴

³⁹ Annual Report on the Operation of the Calcutta Improvement Trust for the Year 1919-1920, Calcutta Improvement Trust, Calcutta, pp. 15-16.

⁴⁰ Annual Report, 1919-1920, p. 16.

⁴¹ Computed from the Progress Reports (of the Activities of the CIT) for the Quarters between 30 June, 1918 and 30 March, 1920.

⁴² Annual Report, 1919-1920, p. 16.

⁴³ Annual Report, 1920-1921, p. 16.

⁴⁴ Letter from Hon'ble Mr. L. S. S. O'Malley, C. I. E., I. C. S. to the Chairman, Calcutta Improvement Trust, Govt. of Bengal, Municipal Department, Municipal Branch, No. 254., T. M. Appendix B, Annual Report, 1920-21, p. 65.

As we have already discussed, the officials of the Trust anticipated a layered dispersal of population from the central city with the unfolding of various street schemes. The Census of 1911 gave them an unmistakable sense that population from the central city areas was gradually moving towards suburban wards and municipalities. In fact, the Census of 1911 shows that all the wards outside Circular Road and Sealdah Station experienced an influx of population. In Beniapukur and Ballygunge for instance, population plummeted by 53.5 percent and 28 percent respectively. Entally, Beniapukur and Tollygunge registered a steady growth of female population by 2000, 5,300 and 2,700 respectively. The increase of female population in these areas suggested a growth in permanent household population in suburbs of the city. Thus, when the Trust began to integrate these suburbs with the city proper through an extensive road network, these areas had already begun to witness a land crisis. The existing male-centric *bustee* population in the central city could hardly be mobilized to buy land, or to find rented housing in these areas.

The early 20th century record of the price of land in many of Calcutta's suburbs, such as Kossipore-Chitpore, Maniktala, Bullygunj and Tollygunj, could hardly convince a newly dis-housed person with a meagre compensation to moving out to an unspecified suburb. Already in 1901, it was estimated that in the Cossipore-Chitpur Municipality, land could not be acquired for less than Rs. 15000 per acre. In Cossipore Road (near the junction of the Gun-Factory Road), the Eastern Bengal State Railways acquired frontage land at Rs. 24000 per acre. In Belgachia, the maximum rate at which frontage lands were acquired for the expansion of the railway yards reached to Rs. 36000 per acre. In the adjacent Patipukur, the acquisition cost of land (in 1902) was much cheaper, but, it was never less than Rs. 3600 per acre. In the same year, lands in the still forested Maniktala Municipality and Baghmari Road were acquired for the extension of the chord line. The cost of land acquisition was between Rs. 9000 and Rs. 3600 per acre.⁴⁵

Between 1900 and 1903, different railway companies and the Tramway Commissioners acquired land in massive scale in places like Talla, Belgachia, Paikpara, Ultodingi, and Bullygunj, thus giving the city yet another boundary to the north and south. This led to a scarcity of available land, and a subsequent hike in their prices in those areas. Towards the end of the First World War, the market price of land in even the remotest of the suburbs was more than Rs. 1000 per *kottah* which was £4500 an acre,⁴⁶ which means when the Trust undertook a massive overhaul of the inner-city, the land price in the suburbs was already extremely high, and hence the *price differential between the centre and the suburb was considerably less*—something we will closely follow in this paper. As a result, there was not much scope for the dispersal of rent, and decongestion of the inner city by movement of dispersed/displaced populations to the suburbs, even if the Trust concentrated on developing better communication networks between the city and its suburbs. In these suburbs, the sheer presence of the railway yard created a continuous wall of circulation that obstructed the expansion of the city to the other side of the yard. The city effectively crossed the rail yards much later—between 1950s and 1980s.

An area wise comparison of land prices between London and Calcutta during the War revealed that Calcutta's suburban lands were sold at an average price which was 20 times higher than their London counterparts. However, a comparison of land prices in the inner-city areas in Calcutta and

⁴⁵ The figures presented in this paragraph are derived from the Proceedings of the Home Department, Calcutta Improvement Scheme (Appendix E), Note, Dated 2 February, 1904, by the Secretary on the Probable Cost of Acquiring Land in the Neighbourhood of Calcutta, pp, 87-89, Municipalities—A, October 1904, Nos. 33-36, National Archives of India.

⁴⁶C. H. Bompas, *The Work of the Calcutta Improvement Trust*, 1927.

London revealed that during the same time Calcutta's average land price was two to four times cheaper than that of land price in central London.⁴⁷

The colonial officials attributed such an 'abnormal distribution of land values' partly to the topographic specificity of Calcutta which was 'shut in between the river on the west and the Salt Lakes on the east, with very little room for expansion', and partly to the acquisition of suburban land for rail yards between 1896 and 1906.⁴⁸ In fact, in Calcutta, the divide between the two sides of a rail yard was not just spatial. It was also civic, moral, and cultural. Even in 1970s, the other side of the track was considered the natural end of the urban modernity where the wagon breakers and Naxalite insurgents, and poorer and degraded East Bengali refugees would crowd the neighbourhoods—a new frontier to be conquered by flyovers.

The demolition of slums and lower-middle class dwellings from the Central Avenue area enabled the Marwari traders to gradually shift from the alleys of the Burrabazaar to the more lucrative frontal sites in Kalootola.⁴⁹ The upgradation of Kalootola meant that a sizeable section of Muslim petty merchants, traders, shopkeepers, artisans and small moneylenders (Kabulis) were dislocated from that area. These Muslim groups were fiercely antagonistic to the Marwaris, a factor that fuelled intermittent riots between these two groups in 1912, 1918 and 1926.⁵⁰

It is important to mention that in Bombay; the coexistence of factories and civic life gave birth to an urban material culture in which the Trust could hardly ignore working class housing issues for too long in its vision for a future city.⁵¹ Calcutta on the other hand, developed as an administrative centre and a transit hub, with numerous commercial establishments. In the first couple of decades of the 20th century, only a minor part of the Corporation area had modern industrial enclaves. The working class was predominantly male, and was primarily constituted by transport coolies connected to transit centres and warehouses. In the absence of a unified shop floor, classic trade unionism was significantly absent among transit workers. In this city, housing became a political question only in the second half of the 20th century at the time of the upper caste Bengali refugee influx.

⁴⁷ An exchange between Bompas and C E Payne who was the Chairman of the Calcutta Corporation in 1910s, and then became a surveyor in London gives us such a picture of the land market in Calcutta and its suburbs. Bompas informed Payne that during the War, in some schemes the Trust had to acquire land in Calcutta's suburbs for 5000 Pounds per acre. In reply, Payne wrote, 'Suburban land round London, with a good road frontage, main drainage, and all modern conveniences, cost roughly from 5 to 7 Pounds per foot frontage, and in especially convenient areas like Wimbledon it cost 10 Pounds per foot frontage, and sometimes more. That was roughly equivalent to from 1000 to 1500 Pounds an acre, rising, perhaps, in certain cases, to 2000 Pounds'. See C E Bompas, *The Work of the Calcutta Improvement Trust*, 1927.

⁴⁸ C. H. Bompas, *The Work of the Calcutta Improvement Trust*, 1927.

⁴⁹ Such a trend was registered in the Census of 1921.

⁵⁰ S Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal, 1905-1947*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1991.

⁵¹ Already by 1917, the total area covered by the working class chawls in Bombay covered an area of 77, 354 Square Yards, and the actual cost of building was Rs. 28,82,879. See C H Bompas, Note on the Bombay Improvement Trust *Chawls*, Proceedings of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, Meeting No. 301, 29 July, 1918, p. 3.

Section III The Rent Storm

Such was the situation when the shiver of the Great War was felt in Calcutta's land market. There had been a considerable hike in house rent in certain parts of the city from 1918.⁵² By the second half of 1919, the land situation had reached the dimensions of a definite crisis of sorts. This could be evinced by the fact that the Maharajadhirja of Burdwan, Bijoy Chand Mahatab, whose family enjoyed rent-collecting rights in Posta bazar and the whole of the Tireta bazar on the western margin of the fledging Central Avenue, warned in the provincial legislature in March 1920, that Calcutta was really at the brink of a second Bolshevik Revolution with rental values more than doubling within a year's time in several cases.⁵³ On an average, the Government acknowledged, there was a hike of house rents in Calcutta and its suburbs by 50 percent between 1917 and 1920.⁵⁴ On 30 September, 1919, the Provincial Government of Bengal appointed a Committee to gather evidence on the 'abnormal' rise in house rent and property prices in Calcutta. The Rent Committee submitted its report to the Government on 23 February, 1920.⁵⁵ Gathering evidence of the hike of house rent in different parts of the city, the Committee recommended an emergency Rent Control Act to monitor and cap the exorbitant rent profiteering by the landlords. One of the contributing factors of the rent storm, according to the Committee, was the slump in building operations during the five years of War. Further, during the war years, the Trust demolished 643 masonry houses, and disposed 468 *bighas* of land at a much higher margin than the cost of acquisition, and in this process, dis-housed more than 50000 individuals from the scheme areas.⁵⁶

All this happened at a time when the war induced commercial and industrial boom attracted more labourers to the city. The jute industry for instance expanded from 69 to 85 factories between 1914 and 1923, with a 36.8 percent increase in the workforce in Calcutta and the adjacent industrialized municipalities.⁵⁷ The presence of a huge presidency secretariat, other government and business headquarters, the Mint near Burrabazar, and an extremely well propertied University within the limits of the Corporation area meant that a large quantity of prime land was always kept out of circulation in the market, which provided the historical precondition to the crisis.⁵⁸

The available evidence on the rent storm, however, suggests that it affected the central and the southern parts of the city more prominently than other areas of the city.⁵⁹ The Rent Committee

⁵² It was estimated that there was a 38 percent hike in house rent in 1918. India Department of Statistics, *War Prices and House Rents*, 3. Also see Debjani Bhattacharyya 2016.

⁵³ The Speech of the Hon'ble the Maharajadhiraja Bahadur of Burdwan at the Legislative Council, List of Business—Item No. 5, Legislative Business, The Calcutta Rent Bill, 1920, Proceedings of the Bengal Legislative Council on Wednesday, March 31, 1920, Government of Bengal, Legislative Department, The Calcutta Gazette, Part IV-A, pp. 248-254.

⁵⁴ The Speech of the Hon'ble the Maharajadhiraja Bahadur of Burdwan at the Legislative Council.

⁵⁵ The Speech of the Hon'ble the Maharajadhiraja Bahadur of Burdwan at the Legislative Council.

⁵⁶ Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into Land Values and Rents in Calcutta, Supplement to the Calcutta Gazette, February 25, 1920, pp. 197-216.

⁵⁷ D. Bhattacharyya, 2016.

⁵⁸ Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into Land Values and Rents in Calcutta.

⁵⁹ The Speech of Hon'ble Rai Radha charan Pal Bahadur, at the Legislative Council, List of Business—Item No. 6 and 6 A, Legislative Business, The Calcutta Rent Bill, 1920, Proceedings of the Bengal Legislative Council on Wednesday, March 31, 1920, Government of Bengal, Legislative Department, The Calcutta Gazette, Part IV-A, pp. 254-255.

circulated about 1000 forms asking the landlords and the tenants about the current rental situation in the city. The Committee received only around 260 filled in forms.⁶⁰ Given that in 1919-1920, the number of masonry houses in the city was 36000 (out of which 15000 houses were occupied by the owners, 17000 houses by the tenants, and 5000 by commercial establishments and warehouses), the sample collected by the Rent Committee was far from being representative of the situation.⁶¹ A survey of the evidence shows that the majority of responses came from the neighbourhoods of the Central Avenue, Bowbazaar, and Park Street⁶²--areas also affected by the work of the Improvement Trust. Thus, in his speech, the Maharaja of Burdwan documented the following:

In Lower Circular Road, the rent of three rooms has been raised from Rs. 100 to Rs. 175; in Elliot Road, the rent of a house with seven rooms has been increased from Rs. 220 to Rs. 400; in Zakaria Street the rent of one room was Rs. 18, it is now Rs. 35; in Boloram De Street Rs. 80 was demanded for a house let for Rs. 40 in the year 1916, and the rents of many flats south of Park Street have been raised from Rs. 200 or there about to Rs. 400.⁶³

A further investigation of this evidence suggests that the house in Balaram De street (in Jorasanko area) fell at the intersection of the Central Avenue, where the Improvement Trust acquired land at Rs. 2000-3000 a *cottab* and sold the same at Rs. 6000-8000 a *cottab*.⁶⁴ The expansion of the Central Avenue in this area swallowed the erstwhile Jorapukur Square Lane. A comparison of properties between the Street Directories for the years 1918⁶⁵ and 1933⁶⁶ further reveals some major readjustment of properties near the intersection between the Central Avenue and Balaram De Street. A *bustee* land at 49 Balaram De Street, for instance, appears to be recycled into a solicitors' Farm sometimes between 1918 and 1933. The property at No. 50 Balaram De Street, where Naran Dassi and Naran Moti Devi (prostitutes) inhabited in 1918, found no reference in the 1933 Street Directory. By 1933, at least three commercial properties were added to No. 52 Balaram De Street, which had no existence in 1918. In the adjacent Central Avenue, all the property names in the 1933 Directory appeared to be of non-residential-commercial nature—thus, we have Kaviraj Promotho Nath Sen & Joshi and Co. at No. 14 Central Avenue, where Central Avenue intersected Balaram De Street, and the famous Merzapore Building at P-18-B Central Avenue that hosted a number of commercial addresses including the New Bengal Motor Works and Store Enamelling House. Similarly, 28-B Central Avenue was occupied by the Presidency Electric Co. in 1933.

⁶⁰The Speech of Hon'ble Rai Radha charan Pal Bahadur.

⁶¹ The Speech of Hon'ble Rai Radha charan Pal Bahadur.

⁶² The vicinity of Park Street up to the Lower Circular Road used to host a sizeable section of British officials and the British commercial establishments. Many of the buildings in this area were owned by the native landlords. This means that the British voice within the Rent Committee tended to side with the tenants. In his speech at the Bengal Legislative Assembly, Rai Radha Charan Pal Bahadur pointed out how the composition of the Rent Committee was tilted overwhelmingly to the tenant side.

⁶³ The Speech of the Hon'ble the Maharajadhiraja Bahadur of Burdwan, p. 250.

⁶⁴ The Speech of Hon'ble Rai Radha charan Pal Bahadur.

⁶⁵ Thacker's Indian Directory 1918, Embracing the Whole of the Indian Empire, Calcutta Streets, Calcutta, Thacker's Press & Directories, Ltd.

⁶⁶ Thacker's Indian Directory 1933, Embracing the Whole of the Indian Empire, Calcutta Streets, Calcutta, Thacker's Press & Directories, Ltd.

Similarly, in Zachariah Street, the work of the Improvement Trust changed the texture of the neighbourhood 'beyond recognition'. Here, the Trust acquired land at Rs. 2000-3000 a *cottab* and sold the same at more than Rs. 10000. In some cases, the Trust was able to sell land in Zachariah Street at Rs. 260000 a *cottab*.⁶⁷ A comparative study of names and surnames associated with properties along this street between 1918 and 1933 gives us a good understanding of the change that the work of the Trust brought about in the neighbourhood. In 1918 Street Directory, only three properties have been named, while in the 1933 street Directory, there are references to 54 properties along Zachariah Street. Of the 54 properties, first 35 names between Lower Chitpore Road and Surtibagan Lane refer to commercial establishments owned/occupied by people bearing Muslim names. As the street proceeded to the Surtibagan area (where the Improvement Trust had launched its first scheme), the remaining properties (predominantly commercial in nature) had their owners/occupants Bengali-Hindu (upper caste) and Marwari surnames.

What follows from this evidence is that the work of the Improvement Trust in the Central part of the city decisively facilitated the conversion of dwelling spaces into commercial establishments. The steady conversion of properties in these areas led to the erasure of slums and prostitution from the newly created and valorised 'frontage properties'. Further, the exceptional rental situation became a pretext for a newly invigorated municipal war to throw some of the thriving trading activities of this area to the ever-mobile margins of the city. The Koolootola-Tireta bazaar area was also the largest transit centre for India's thriving hide trade. A large number of hide warehouses were located along and between Phears Lane, Harinbari lane, and Canning Street (west). Already in 1914—when the Central Avenue project was kicked off—the Corporation mandated the 'removal from residential areas of tanneries, knacker's yards, and blood, offal and gut factories' into the 'outlying areas' east of the railways tracks of Sealdah.⁶⁸ In the same year, the Corporation transferred a substantial 'Mohamedan slaughter House' at the Halliday Street to the far off Tangra area. As a result, the Corporation incurred a 'corresponding fall in the receipt from slaughtering fees (Rs. 65,130 against Rs. 71,713)' during 1914-15. Needless to say, such ejections impacted heavily on the working class associated with such trades, coming predominantly from the Muslim, Anglo-Indian and Chinese communities⁶⁹.

No wonder that the work of the Improvement Trust received applause from the European visitors to the city. One such visitor was to record the following in 1928:

Since the formation of the Calcutta Improvement Trust in 1913, the changes made by it in the city have greatly contributed to the more expeditious movement of the vehicular traffic, have driven wide thoroughfares through crowded and unsavoury quarters, and *altered even the centre of the city...*The Central Avenue is 100 feet wide, and already shows signs of what a great artery it will be in the future. *Huge structures of four, five and six storeys, are already flanking it.* No Tram-cars run there, and the public vehicular traffic is confined to motor buses, of which, owing to the Trust's provision of wide roads, there are now a great number (emphases mine).⁷⁰

⁶⁷ The Speech of Hon'ble Rai Radha charan Pal Bahadur.

⁶⁸ Report on the Municipal Administration of Calcutta for the Year 1914-15, Calcutta, Corporation Press, 1915, p. 23.

⁶⁹ Report on the Municipal Administration of Calcutta for the Year 1914-15, p. 26.

⁷⁰ A. Macmillan, Seaports of India & Ceylon: Historical and Descriptive, COMMERCIAL AND Industrial Facts, Figures and Resources, London, W H & L Collingridge, 1928, pp. 46-47.

Note how in the eye of the European visitor, the work of the Improvement Trust to inject British architectural and planning ethos at the core of the native city appeared to be a heroic act. Already in 1920, a citizen-motorist of Bombay wrote to the Editor of The Times of India the following:

I have lately returned from paying a visit to Calcutta. Up to the time, of this visit, I have always backed up the claims of Bombay as being ahead of Calcutta, but this is no longer possible... The streets are cleaner. There is an almost total absence of the filthy clouds of dust which get into the eyes, noses and throats of the Bombayite. The roads are for the most part in good condition, and *it is quite possible to get a real motor joy ride even in the erstwhile congested central parts of the city*. Motor traffic is much heavier than in Bombay, and the accidents do not seem to be so numerous either... Sidewalks in Calcutta are made to walk upon, consequently people do not walk any extent in the centre of the roads... (emphasis mine).⁷¹

The Bengali *bhadralok* response to the work of the Improvement Trust was largely cautious, and ambivalent, and at the same time, it referred to a decisive and irreversible change in the ways in which they had ‘selfed’ the city in their childhood, and as they were experiencing the city after the onslaught of improvement. While describing the various modes of navigation in Calcutta, Kshitindranath Tagore—a notable resident of Jorasanko, for instance, —traced a decisive rupture in time—*sekaal o ekaal* (‘then and now’), marked by the improvement work of the Trust in the central city.⁷² Thus, Tagore wrote the following:

Forget about those who left the city half a century ago, even those residents who went abroad ten or twenty years ago, if they came back now would find parts of Calcutta unrecognizable.⁷³

The *bhadralok* too, took pride to the growing visual acclaim of the city. However, their celebration of the city was always restrained by a sense of the decline of the ‘Bengali enterprise’, as the veritable property market of the central city went in the hands of the Marwari merchants of the Burrabazaar, who, allegedly hoarded land even when a sale would have given them normal profits, and thereby augmenting the crisis in the housing market. During the debate over the Rent Act—time and again—this wound surfaced. In an evocative contribution, Debjani Bhattacharyya has shown how the Bengali rentier class arrived at a distinction between the ‘legitimate speculation of the earlier generation’ (when they controlled the land market), and the ‘so-called culturalized [rent] profiteering of the Marwari classes’⁷⁴ firmly establishing ‘causal relation between the housing crisis and then try of new upcountry and Marwari landlords in Calcutta’s land market’⁷⁵ in the inter-War period. J N Roy, a barrister with some strong socialist proclivities, for instance, held ‘Marwari speculators and up-country profiteers’⁷⁶ responsible for the rent storm. In the new ‘ethnicized’ moral economy of the housing market, the (often emotive and sentimentalized) category of the ‘lower middle class’ appeared to blur the distinction between the mass of petty landowners and small tenants. Thus, in his speech at the Legislative Assembly, Rai Radha Charan Pal Bahadur (also

⁷¹ Calcutta vs. Bombay, Letter to the Editor, The Times of India, 21 June, 1920.

⁷² K. Tagore, *Kolikatay Chola-phera: Sekaal o Ekaal*, Kolkata, by the Author, 1930.

⁷³ K. Tagore, 1930, p. 135, Translated by P. Datta, 2015, p. 21.

⁷⁴ D. Bhattacharyya, 2016, p. 467.

⁷⁵ D. Bhattacharyya, 2016, p. 472.

⁷⁶ D. Bhattacharyya, 2016, p. 474.

a municipal commissioner and a member of the Improvement Trust) could arrive at a sharp class distinction between the substantial landlords like the Maharaja of Burdwan, and the small property owners who ‘travel in tram-cars and cannot afford to drive in motor cars’⁷⁷.

It is difficult to track the popular responses to the improvement work of the Trust during the early decades. But, it can well be surmised that it has severely dislocated the everyday life of the working people. Time and again, the transport sector workers of the city resisted new traffic rules that considered slow-moving locomotion as potential obstruction to automobile traffic. In 1930 for instance, the Corporation of Calcutta, in connivance with the Trust, promulgated a new traffic rule to restrict the movement of bullock carts beyond certain hours and boundaries of prominent wholesale market places. This was of course itself an effect of newly asphalted roads that for the corporation described a characteristic geographical distribution of smooth-flowing traffic to which the carters presented an obstruction. But the carters did not take to this lightly. In association with young Communist labour leaders of the time like Abdul Momin, the mostly up-country carters decided to wage a protest against the Corporation’s new traffic rules dividing the organization into six small zonal committees. On 1 April, 1930, the day when the new rule was to come to force, carters started taking away bullocks from the carts at about noontime, dismantled the wheels from the carts and arranged them crosswise. In 1935, an IB report noted how the official Communist Press acclaimed the strike as the ‘first barricade street fight with the police in India—which indeed it was’⁷⁸. The first day’s firing left seven carters dead. A procession of about 500000 people took the carters’ bodies to perform the last rites.⁷⁹

Section IV

Rent Act in Action

In accordance with the recommendations of the Rent Committee the Calcutta Rent Control Act came in force in May 1920, initially for a period of three years.⁸⁰ It instituted a rent controller, and above him, a ‘Calcutta Improvement Tribunal’ to check ‘rent profiteering’ by a certain class of landlords. The rent controller was mandated to standardize rent for ‘premises’ (which initially excluded non-masonry buildings such as huts), which meant ‘the rent at which the premises were let on the first day of November 1918, or, where they were not let on that date, the rent at which they were last let before that date and after the first day of November 1915, with the addition in either case, of ten percent, on such rent’.⁸¹ The operation of the Rent controller and the Tribunal above him, gave birth to new definitions, and in the process of formalizing the landlord-tenant relation, created new sub-categories and new complications and further ambiguities. Some of the conflicts found resolution in protracted High Court judgements. As a modified version of the Act was further implemented in 1923 for an additional period of three years ending in 1926, it surfaced a layered reality of ownership, lease-holding, tenancy and sub-tenancy. In short, the life of the Rent Act created an archive of rental disputes. In this section of the paper, we will briefly mention

⁷⁷ The Speech of Hon’ble Rai Radha charan Pal Bahadur, p. 255.

⁷⁸ T. Sarkar, Bengal 1928-1934: The Politics of Protest. New Delhi. Oxford University Press, pp.102-103.

⁷⁹ T. Sarkar, Bengal 1928-1934: The Politics of Protest. New Delhi. Oxford University Press.

⁸⁰ B. C. Law and V L Mookherjee, Rent Acts: Calcutta, Bombay and Rangoon, Calcutta, R. Cambay & Co., 1924.

⁸¹ B. C. Law and V L Mookherjee, Rent Acts, p. 4.

a particular High Court judgement,⁸² to talk about a major trend in urban rental economy, which, if exposed to undeterred market forces, privileges commercial establishments over housing.

The plaintiff Rekabchand Doogar moved to the High Court seeking ejection of four of his European tenants from his premises at 39 Lower Circular Road. The defendant J R D'cruz was a 'monthly tenant' paying Rs. 90 to the plaintiff. On 30 November 1920, the plaintiff, through his attorney served a month's notice to D'cruz and three others, to vacate the premises by 31 December 1920. The High Court entertained only the claim of D'cruz as three others unsuccessfully pleaded the Rent Act and exited from the arena of dispute. In this case, the Bench headed by Justice Buckland first settled a number of important questions in relation to the Rent Act:

1. Does the plaintiff bona fide require the premises for his own occupation?
2. Has the defendant paid rent due by him to the fullest extent allowable by the Calcutta Rent Act by the 15th day of the month next following that for which the rent was payable in accordance with the provision of Section 11, Sub-section (5)?
3. Has the plaintiff refused to accept the rent offered, and has the defendant duly de-pouted it, with the Rent Controller under Section 11, Sub-section (4)?
4. Is the defendant entitled to relief under the Calcutta Rent Act?

The above questions give us a general sense of the way the rent controller, the Tribunal and the Court arrived at an understanding of the contractual relation between the landlord and the tenant. Under this Act, we are told, the tenant enjoyed the right to relief only when he could show a good history of rental payment to the landlord, and when the landlord was not in 'true' need of accessing the premises in question for his/her own housing. Justice Buckland identified that in Doogar vs D'cruze, the 'real controversy' revolved around the first question, i.e., whether the landlord's (read plaintiff's) claim of occupancy was in spirit of the Rent Act. In this, the Judge firmly held that the plaintiff was on a wrong foot, and hence the judgment went in favour of the tenant-defendant.

The prosecution however give us an access to the entire process of negotiation. We for instance come to know that the four tenants occupied 39 Lower Circular Road premises in June 1916, and in September 1919, the plaintiff served a notice to vacate the house as he wished to let out the whole premises on a lease to a single tenant by the name of Macfarlane and Co. The tenants did not vacate the house, and in the meantime, the plaintiff's negotiation with Macfarlane and Co. fell through. Subsequently, the plaintiff tried to strike out a deal with Government of Bengal to house its Survey Office. Again, the tenants decided to stay on despite a fresh notice of ejection was served to them by the plaintiff. This resulted in bitter friction between the landlord and his tenants, who, this time, complained about irregular water supply in their apartments. The conflict reached to such an extent that the parties went to the Criminal Courts, but, at this stage, the proceedings were dropped.

Depending on such evidence, Buckland concluded that until August 1920, the plaintiff did not seek the premises for his own housing. In the meantime, Rent Act came in force that made a legal provision in favour of landlords in case they needed to occupy the premises in rent for their own use. Soon, the plaintiff changed his position and argued that in the middle of September 1920, his wife gave birth to a child, and that the doctor attending the mother and the child advised him to move from his present residence at 37 Canning Street, due to the insanitary condition of the house

⁸²Rekhab Chand Doogar vs J.R. D'Cruz on 23 February, 1922, Calcutta High Court, (Bench Buckland: Judgement). All the citations of this case presented in this section of the paper, are taken from this judgement.

owing to 'the presence of a hide godown at the back of the house, and smell, and the fact the house was ill ventilated'. When the Doctor was brought to the Court as a witness he stood by his advice that the ill mother and the child be removed to a place 'where they could get more light and air'. The doctor said that the 'plaintiff's wife suffered from malarial fever and urine trouble, and that, therefore, he gave the advice that the plaintiff should remove' to a more sanitary neighbourhood.

In response, the defendant's lawyer furnished before the Court a set of evidence that suggested that the plaintiff had already negotiated a rental deal at Rs. 1,250 per month with Messers. R D Cooper and Co. for a portion of his residence at 37 Canning Street. Around the same time, the plaintiff appeared to conclude a deal with another Hume Pipe Company. From this, the Judge concluded that the fact of the landlord 'depriving himself of a considerable portion of the space in his own house in No. 37 Canning Street, where he had lived few four years in order to make it over to these mercantile firms or companies' did not hold the spirit of the Rent Act, and therefore, the Judge declared the defendant 'entitled to relief under the Rent Act', and that the suit was dismissed. But, before that, the Judge had to settle another conflict of opinion between the plaintiff and the defendant regarding the 'standard rent' of the apartment in question. It was found the initial rental agreement between the two parties was at Rs. 90 per month. But, in May 1920, the plaintiff charged rent at the rate of Rs. 150 per month. The defendant refused to pay at that rate, and instead agreed to pay at the rate of Rs. 120 per month, which he said was the 'standard rent' for his part of the premises. Upon further investigation, it was found that the rent controller did not yet standardize the rent for that premises using the Rent Act formula. However, the counsel for the defendant pointed out that in fact Macfarlane and Co wished to pay Rs. 115 for that part of the premises, and that the defendant agreed to pay an additional sum of Rs. 5 over and above the prevailing 'market rate', and in fact he deposited the same to the rent controller to strengthen his standing vis-a-vis the Rent Act. The Judge instructed the rent controller to settle the rental issue and concluded the file.

An examination of a number of such cases and petitions shows that such legal fights between the landlord and the tenant was perhaps restricted to the upper echelons of the society. The tenants had the entitlement to relief only in so far as she/he was able to regularly pay the rent. This means, the operation of the Rent Act would have dispossessed several tenants and sub-tenants whose landlords were able to take the rental disputes to the rent controller. Anyone who lived in Calcutta in the 20th century would know that rent collection and payment in due course was a messy affair in the lower-middle class and working-class quarters of the city. In that sense, the Rent Act could hardly make a significant dent in formalizing these relationships in the frame of the law.

For a number of years since 1926, the city's rental economy was not governed by any acts as such. The War-led land boom was succeeded by a slump in the land market, but, the property prices never went back to the mid-war standards. As we have already noticed in the above case, the expansion of business and commercial spaces in dwelling areas had been a matter of much anxiety during and after the First World War. This trend would continue in succeeding decades. In fact, the 1933 Street Directory for Calcutta refers to both No. 37 Canning Street and No. 39 Lower Circular Road buildings as hosting a number of commercial and business outlets.⁸³The house

⁸³No. 37 Canning Street in 1933 (from the Street Directory): Trivedi & Co, F N Sarkar; National seed plant stores, Dutta Chakarvartv & Co, Hari Hegall & Co, N H Ojah & Co, S C Dass, National Aniline & Chemical Co., Bhagwanlall P Worah, Commercial, Advt Agency, Pragjee Bros and Sushila Bros. No. 39 Lower Circular Road in 1933: Crescent Court, F E Browne, M N Vuleanizing Co, Boral and Co, Dr. D DAnglisari (dental surgeon), O R Binke,

famine became a continuous feature of the city. The Census of 1931, for instance, recorded 16 residents per household in the city. By 1941 that average rose to 27.5 persons per household. Again, during the Second World War, Calcutta came under rent regulation (1942, 1943, and 1946).

In Calcutta, the short-lived prosperity—coupled with the political loss of capital to Delhi, the virtual non-existence of a credible banking network, and the loss of credibility of government bonds during the War—caused a kind of competitive anxiety among those who made quick money during the war years. In the absence of a credible investment destination, they began to hoard land for an indefinite period of time, and found it more profitable to keep land out of building activities that would otherwise have resulted in an enhanced supply of houses in the rental market. In the inter-war period, house famine became a continuous feature, which, as the above High Court case suggests, affected even the middle class white population of the city, many of whom were actually tenants of Indian landlords—a feature that, as we have already seen, significantly shaped the exigencies of the rent debate of this time. The impact of house famine was severe for the lower middle class and working-class populations of the city, which became part of the city’s cultural archive through the *Kallol* era literature.

Conclusion

The rent storm in Calcutta was intimately connected to a series of street reforms, such as the emergence of avenue style streets with wide sidewalks. Paradoxically, such spaces provoked and but also enabled bodies to congregate and forge alliances to lay claim on it as a place to walk and move, to protest, to vend and dwell. In Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay’s larger work, he made an attempt to anticipate this dialectic of the materiality of collective action and the reconfiguration of space with the unfolding of collective action.⁸⁴

Let us conclude by pointing out the larger political economic and historical trajectories of the above discussion. Here, we need to mention that already in the late 19th century the separation between the domain of the market and the state became an orthodoxy in the policy circles. State was more and more encouraged to facilitate autonomous market mechanisms without interfering too much in its operation. It is quite natural that the passage of the Rent Acts in various cities during and following the First World War was a matter of intense anxiety among the liberal policy-makers of the time. Everywhere—from the metropolitan cities to the colonial cities—they were all in agreement that any prolongation of such a legislation beyond the exceptional years of the War would mean the state’s interference in the ‘natural process’ of the market, that, when left to its own devices, would permit the formation of ‘normal prices’. The Calcutta experience shows that the self-regulating equilibrated unity of the market forces actually tends to privilege commercial spaces over residential dwellings. The Rent Act era in cities like London, Berlin, New York, Bombay, Rangoon and Calcutta; remains important in articulating this tension as a global urban question. In this paper, we have tried to show how a global moment of exception translated into a particular form of urban interventionism at the behest of the CIT in Calcutta.

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⁸⁴ R. Bandyopadhyay, *Negotiating Informality: Changing Faces of Kolkata’s Footpaths, 1975-2005*, PhD Dissertation, Faculty of Arts, Jadavpur university, 2010, <http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/146584>. Also, see R. Bandyopadhyay, *Obstruction: Counter-pedestrianism and Trajectories of an Infrastructure Public, Decision*, 2017: DOI 10.1007/s40622-017-0155-7.

The developments that we have witnessed in this period had a strong root in the colonial political economy in the second half of the 19th century. In fact, it can be said that during the second half of the 19th century, the colonial state's fiscal base began to shift from the agrarian, and forest revenue to a more diverse range of sources beyond the productive land.⁸⁵ From the late-19th century, urban centres began to be more prominent sector of the state's revenue base, where *proximity* displaced *productivity* in the determination of rent. In 1876, Calcutta Municipality assumed the structure of a giant municipal corporation—an entity mandated more resolutely to bring about an 'overall improvement of the town'. Such a corporation was to rely on its share in rising property prices by translating 'property into a taxable entity'⁸⁶. The First World War remains an important conjuncture in the history of the emergence of modern cities in India.

⁸⁵ P. Chatterjee, *Bengal 1920-1947: The Land Question*, Calcutta, K P Bagchi, 1984.

⁸⁶ D. Bhattacharyya, 2016, p. 468.