

## INSIDE COLONIAL INDIA'S CUTCHERRIES

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In describing colonial or imperial built landscapes, architectural history has traditionally tended to focus on major urban schemes and grand, monumental buildings such as governmental palaces, public institutions or transport infrastructures like bridges and railway terminals. This is true of traditional 'received histories' of colonial architecture which describe the heroic achievements of the rulers,<sup>1</sup> and largely also of postcolonial studies up until the late 1990s which looked critically at the political, economic and socio-cultural implications of colonialism and imperialism, but ironically, was still preoccupied with grandiose city designs and iconic buildings, this time as expressions of oppressive colonial power.<sup>2</sup> In addition, one sees a disproportionate emphasis on the architectural artefact and the formal language of colonialism. Their on-ground, day-to-day material or spatial patterns and practices, and how they were experienced or inhabited by colonial subjects have remained largely obscure.

This study arose from an instinct to search for other protagonists, narratives and lived experiences of colonial architectures. Focusing on the province of Bengal in eastern India between the 1820s and 60s, it shifts attention to interior regions (rather than metropolitan, often coastal, cities such as Calcutta, Madras, Delhi or Bombay) and to the ubiquitous, ordinary spaces of everyday provincial governance of British colonial rule as embodied in the district *cutcherry* (colonial office). In 1765, the British East India Company (henceforth referred to as 'the Company') had acquired from the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam the rights of agricultural revenue collection of the fertile eastern provinces of India. Through the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, provincial *cutcherries* developed as tax collection nodes that formed the nerve-centres of *zilla sadar* towns (headquarters of revenue districts), which in turn dotted the interior agrarian landscape of Bengal and represented vital pegs of the colonial revenue economy.

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<sup>1</sup> In case of India, see e.g. Philip Davies, *Splendours of the Raj: British Architecture in India 1660-1947*, London: John Murray, 1985; Jan Morris and Simon Winchester, *Stones of Empire: The Buildings of the Raj*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> For the Indian instance, see e.g. Anthony D. King, *Colonial Urban Development: Culture, Social Power and Environment*, London, Henley and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976; Thomas R. Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989 and Norma Evenson, *The Indian Metropolis: A View Towards the West*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989.

Specifically, influenced by the works of cultural anthropologists such as Jack Goody, Akhil Gupta and Matthew Hull (1980s-present day) on material-culture and everyday (state) bureaucracy,<sup>3</sup> my research pursues 'paper' and 'paper-work' as fundamental organising elements of colonial governance that produced and was also fed by a spatial logic starting from the interior spaces of *cutcherries* to urban sites and regional geographies. British colonial governance in India was rooted, as Miles Ogborn has shown, in global technologies of writing produced by European mercantile colonialism,<sup>4</sup> and equally fundamentally, as analysed by Christopher Bayly,<sup>5</sup> on the extraction of Mughal administrative knowledge embodied within a Persianette Indian clerical class, its subsequent materialisation into official forms such as paper documents, and further, on what Bhavani Ramani has more recently called a scribal-clerical 'habitus'.<sup>6</sup> A paper-centred culture of documentation, surveys and bureaucratic practices was also the hallmark of the early-nineteenth century colonial government in Bengal that Jon Wilson identifies as one of the earliest modern states in the world.<sup>7</sup>

Following from this, the core engagement of this research is the architecture, spaces and material culture associated with colonial paper-bureaucracy in Bengal. A key dimension is how colonial (revenue) knowledge was transformed into material forms and spaces. The paper-based and writing-oriented habitus of colonial administration mandated a variety of paper records and processes which directly influenced the designs of specific types of furniture, spaces and architectures of colonial governance. Of particular significance were such 'papered spaces' as land record rooms (where revenue knowledge was stored in a material form) and clerical offices (where paper-process was mobilised) within the provincial *cutcherry*.

For the research, I combined extensive on-ground documentations of the material fabric of the buildings with archival research in India and the UK, looking at governmental papers, period literature and art.

Early *cutcherries* were rooted in residential building typologies (such as the bungalow) and often combined offices, courtrooms and domestic spaces which created fuzzy boundaries between these domains. From the 1820s, with the ending of a number of

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<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Jack Goody, 'The State, the bureau and the file' in *The Logic of Writing and the Organisation of Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; Akhil Gupta and Aradhana Sharma (eds.), *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, Oxford and Victoria: Malden, 2006; Matthew S. Hull, *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Miles Ogborn, 'Streysham Master's Office: Accounting for collectivity, order and authority at Fort St. George' in *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, pp. 67- 103.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*, Cambridge Studies in Indian History and Society, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Jon, Wilson, *The Domination of Strangers: Modern Governance in Eastern India 1780-1830*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Indian domestic and global wars for Britain, the stabilisation of the Company's Indian revenues and the expanding need of office space, a new type of cutcherry – what I call the barrack type – appeared. This marked the formal separation of provincial colonial office space from domestic space. It consisted of a linear chain generic spaces, surrounded and accessible by a *verandah* on two or all four sides.

So pivotal were land-records to British colonial rule, that record rooms formed the heart of the spatial composition of *cutcherries* and other spaces such as general offices and courtrooms were arranged with respect to them and not the other way around. Record rooms were typically 18-20' X40-50' modules roofed over with barrel vaults and were increasingly fitted with grilles, louvres and wire mesh to secure them against human, weather and insect intrusion. From the archival records of communications between the headquarters at Calcutta and district *cutcherries* it becomes apparent that the design and layout of record rooms were a major pre-occupation of the Company state. Through the highly prescribed spatial arrangements of paper-records on record-racks and their protocols of naming/labelling, record rooms also tried to de-facto reproduce a mini-map of the revenue geography of the districts of Bengal.

Bureaucratic work created its own spatial cultures. Bayly has shown how during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, 'accountancy' was increasingly viewed as the highest administrative skill, and the *amla*, or administrative clerks - a heterogeneous group which included writers, accountants and translators - became a pivotal constituency of district *cutcherries*.<sup>8</sup> Clerical work was conducted in a series of interconnected open office spaces – which, due to their profusion of doors and windows (mandated by the tropical climate), also came to be porous and fluid spaces, whereby controlling access to/ through them became impossible for colonial authorities. A key group of the cutcherry *amla* were the *munshis*, who were Persianette officers, earlier part of Mughal bureaucracy, and who now became indispensable to British governance due to their command over knowledge of Mughal tax administration, on which the Company's revenue governance was directly founded.<sup>9</sup> The *munshikhana*, or the *munshi's* workspace, was usually directly adjacent to the officer's chambers and courtrooms. As the colonial project of extracting the embodied revenue knowledge from the *mushis* and transforming them into Persian and then English paper-records advanced, we see the displacement of the *munshikhana*, by around the 1860s, by the English-office, which now took over the premium location next to the high official's chambers and courtrooms.

However, as Bayly points out, there were still large gaps between the colonial authorities' revenue knowledge and realities of the Indian hinterlands. British officers

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<sup>8</sup> Bayly, *Empire and Information*, p. 151.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

had to necessarily use lower level *cutcherry* staff as their intermediaries for a range of informal tasks within and beyond the *cutcherry*.<sup>10</sup> These lower level employees had virtually no formal spatial provisions within the *cutcherries*, but in fact wielded forms of indirect power through their mobility and direct contact with the local population in bazars, other town-spaces or villages. The ad-hoc, incremental nature of development of *cutcherry* premises in fact enabled their appropriations in numerous ways especially by Indian employees and visitors, often beyond the control of colonial authorities.

Despite its attempts to only use imported paper from Britain, in reality the *cutcherry's* paper-governance also became dependent on supplies from local bazars as well as the extant Indian (formed during Mughal and colonial times) paper-economy stretching from Kashmir to Bengal. Hence the logic of paper spilled out into and was also shaped by other town spaces (such as bazaars) and regions (paper supply networks). The *cutcherry's* bureaucratic spaces also held culturally produced meanings for Bengali employees - challenging notions of universal experiences of capitalism and secular modernity - who in fact sometimes acted to subvert their instrumentality.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.