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Beyond Commerce: Market Networks and Urban Transformation in Colonial Odisha

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The colonial period witnessed significant changes in the urban landscape of Odisha, shaped not merely by commercial activities but also by the expansion of market networks, transportation systems, administrative institutions, and socio-economic interactions. This paper examines the relationship between market networks and urban transformation in colonial Odisha, highlighting how traditional marketplaces, weekly hats, trading centres, and emerging commercial towns contributed to the reorganisation of urban spaces. It explores the influence of colonial economic policies, infrastructure development, road and railway connectivity, and changing patterns of production and exchange in shaping urban growth. Beyond their function as centres of buying and selling, markets emerged as important spaces of social interaction, cultural exchange, occupational diversification, and the formation of new urban identities. The study also considers the changing relationship between rural hinterlands and urban centres, demonstrating how market networks connected agricultural production, regional trade, and colonial administrative structures. By examining these interconnected processes, the paper argues that urban transformation in colonial Odisha cannot be understood solely through the expansion of trade and commerce. Rather, it must be viewed as a broader process involving spatial reorganisation, social mobility, institutional change, and the emergence of new patterns of urban life. The study thus seeks to situate markets as dynamic institutions that played a crucial role in shaping the economic, social, and spatial history of colonial Odisha.

Keywords: Market Networks, Urban Transformation, Commercial Centres, Weekly Markets, Colonial Economy, Regional Trade, Urbanisation.

The history of Odisha under British colonial rule was marked by significant political, economic, administrative, and social transformations. The British gradually established their control over different parts of Odisha during the nineteenth century. The coastal region of Odisha, particularly Cuttack, Puri, and Balasore, came under British occupation in 1803. Subsequently, the British extended their influence over other regions, including the princely states of Odisha, through indirect political control and administrative arrangements.

British rule introduced new administrative structures, revenue systems, judicial institutions, and commercial policies that transformed the existing socio-economic organisation of the region. The traditional agrarian economy, which was closely connected with local markets, village-level exchanges, periodic haats, and regional trading centres, gradually became integrated into wider colonial commercial networks.

Agriculture remained the principal occupation of the population, with rice, pulses, oilseeds, cotton, and other agricultural products forming important components of regional trade. However, colonial revenue policies, commercialisation of agriculture, and the growing demand for agricultural commodities influenced production patterns and rural market relations. The introduction and expansion of roads, railways, postal communication, and other transport facilities further strengthened connections between rural hinterlands and emerging urban centres.

Cuttack developed as an important administrative and commercial centre, while Balasore and Puri retained their significance as trading, religious, and cultural centres. The development of railway connectivity, particularly during the later nineteenth century, contributed to the movement of agricultural commodities, manufactured goods, and

people across different regions. At the same time, traditional markets and indigenous trading communities continued to play an important role in regional economic life.

Thus, colonial Odisha experienced a complex process of economic and urban transformation in which traditional commercial practices interacted with new colonial institutions and market structures. These developments provide an important historical context for understanding the changing character of markets and urban spaces in Odisha during British rule.

Research Problem

The central research problem of this study is to understand how market networks contributed to the transformation of urban spaces and economic relationships in colonial Odisha. It seeks to examine how traditional markets and weekly haats interacted with expanding colonial trade networks, transportation infrastructure, and administrative institutions. It also investigates whether the expansion of commercial activities brought significant changes in the spatial organisation of towns, occupational structures, patterns of social interaction, and relationships between rural and urban communities.

The Pre-British system

During the British conquest, there were no established markets in Odisha. Each community operated as an autonomous entity. Typically, if a specific village community was unable to produce anything they needed, they would rely on a neighbouring village for it. The inhabitants in that situation did not have to go far distances to obtain their essential items. However, if the necessities could not be met locally, the people had to travel to the weekly markets or fairs in nearby villages on a regular basis.[1] The weekly marketplaces functioned as sporadic commercial hubs for the settlements. Occasionally, the residents refrained from attending the weekly markets due to the distance and instead settled for the commodities offered in the next village. However, in order to obtain essential products, they had to rely on the distant weekly marketplaces, while encountering challenges. In addition to this, there was a prevalent system of annual fairs or melas that the villagers from various villages anxiously anticipated. These fairs provided an opportunity for them to purchase specialized commodities that were produced in remote locations.

Before 1803, the requirements of the village community in Odisha were fulfilled in this manner. Irregular markets hinder the effective showcasing of local items, which in turn reduces the ability to attract a large client base. Consequently, the producers had to patiently await the occurrence of these weekly markets in order to sell their wares. Occasionally, the producers were had to bring back their merchandise, such as hats, since there were no buyers interested in purchasing them, or they had to sell the goods at lower prices that were below the production cost.[2] As a result, the producers of these items experienced a loss of morale, leading to the eventual disappearance of the products from those marketplaces. Temporary markets failed to sufficiently motivate manufacturers to increase production due to the absence of dividends. Merchants likewise encountered similar issues in volatile markets. If a merchant, who was gathering various types of goods, went to a weekly market and saw that there were no clients on that specific day, he would not be tempted to return to such an unpredictable market in the following days. Instead, he would search for opportunities elsewhere in hopes of finding success. Consequently, the inhabitants of neighbouring villages endured hardship since they were unable to obtain their necessities from the markets. These handicaps naturally hindered the growth of economic operations in Odisha.

Cuttack Market

A magistrate in Cuttack named Robert Ker voiced his displeasure with Odisha's inconsistent marketing strategy. He was the first officer from England to come up with this idea. He recommended to the Bengali government that regular markets be set up as a foundation for the development of this nation's economy. He suggested in his letter to the Board of Revenue that new permanent marketplaces be established in the town of Cuttack and in a number of other commercial hubs. The government granted land leases to prospective merchants of Cuttack town based on suggestions, allowing them to operate businesses in the town. These shops were granted an exemption from any form of rent and tax. Stores were established in prominent locations inside the town of Cuttack. Cuttack rapidly emerged as a prominent and consistent commercial hub in the 19th century. Transported to this location were agricultural products from estates that were permanently settled, including Kanika, Kujang, Darpan, Aul, etc., to be sold to traders from Madras, Bombay, Ceylon, Laccadive, Maldives islands, and other European nations.[3] Over time, Cuttack became a significant commercial hub within the entire Cuttack district. It involved the handling of diverse types of merchandise. The Tributary Mahals were the main suppliers of forest goods to the market, such as hides, which were then sold to traders from Kanpur in northern India. They used this market as their main focus for commercial dealings and visited it regularly. The Cuttack market transacted with Kanpur merchants in 1869–1870, with a hide deal valued at Rs. 23,053. It was estimated that only 58 skins out of the 74,243 skins were exported through False Point in 1876–1877. The town of Cuttack is well known around the world for its superb filigree work.[4]

False Point Market

False Point was officially designated as a significant port in Odisha in 1860-61. In times of famine, Cuttack became a major hub for the rice trade. It was connected to False Point via Taladenda canal.[5] A brisk trade was conducted in the town of Cuttack. In addition to the exported goods, Cuttack town received other imported items such as cotton, kerosene oil, and different sorts of metals, and gunny bags from False Point. Merchants from various interior villages flocked to the Cuttack market to gather these items for further trade in their villages. Therefore, throughout the 19th century, the market at Cuttack remained bustling as a significant hub for commerce. The

implementation of this novel marketing method significantly expedited the expansion of commercial endeavours among the residents of Odisha.

Kendrapara

Because to its close vicinity to False Point—the market is connected to False Point by the Taladanda and Kendrapara Canal. Thus, Kendrapara's importance has grown up. It is feasible to ship agricultural products from neighbouring villages to Chandbali or False Point via Pattamundai for export. Following the establishment of Chandbali port in 1872, the Pattamundai market functioned as Chandbali's backup market. The Dhamara port may receive a sizable supply of food grains from the Jaipur market, which may subsequently be shipped to the Chandbali port.[6] Therefore, toward the conclusion of the 19th century, several new markets emerged to aid the commercial activities of the Cuttack district.

Balasore Market

Situated near the Borabalanga River, European communities selected this location as a major market. Balasore port became the principal centre of European trade activities in the latter part of the 18th century when Pipili and Hariharpur fell. In the town of Balasore, structures were built by English colonists. The ruins of Barabati are unequivocal evidence of the ancient Balasore town.[7] The significance of the market ceased to exist by 1786. Upon seeing the village, the English were captivated by its unique geographical features. They made the decision to establish a marketing system in the town, aiming to generate commercial advantages for both themselves and the local artists. Balasore has established itself as a permanent market inside the district. Conveniently, imports were brought to the town and then distributed to local merchants for sale in the neighbouring villages.

In the Balasore district, Bhadrak grew in importance as a market following the construction of Chandbali port. The Ruknadelpur or Basudevpur route connected Bhadrak to the port. There was a route that led straight to this town. It would be possible to convey the surplus agricultural products from the southeast of the Balasore area to the market, mostly for export. It evolved into a market that served as a source of supply. Remuna served as a significant commercial market within the district. It served as a hub for merchants specializing in the trade of brass metal. Jamjhari market, located 29 miles south of Balasore, used to obtain its supply of salt from the Aurangs of South-East in the district. During the 19th century, the British were interested in the salt trade, which was centred on this city.[8]

The Balasore district included a number of important marketplaces, including Baliapal, Basta, Kamarda, Deula, Jaleswar, Nangaleswar, and Single, in addition to major urban areas. The trade of salt and rice was the main industry in these markets. The district's economic activity has expanded greatly as a result of these corporate centres. There were a number of atypical hubs or sites that functioned as secondary marketplaces to the main markets. Balasore's economy grew significantly in the 19th century as a result of this business hub.[9]

Puri Market

The marketing system in Puri was not modern during the British occupation. The rivers inside the districts were not conducive to internal trade. During the rainy season, there were substantial floods, whereas in other seasons, the river bottoms remained arid. Owing to natural factors, the entire district has lagged behind in terms of commercial endeavours. Individuals were satisfied with the yield they obtained from their properties. The town of Puri primarily offers commercial facilities due to the influx of pilgrims visiting Lord Jagannath. Puri town has transformed into a conventional marketplace that acquires commodities from nearby villages, specifically agricultural products, to cater to the needs of pilgrims.[10] The Port Act of 1858 was applied to Puri port. As a result, the Government made the decision to utilize this port for the purpose of exporting rice to various locations. Warehouses were created in a haphazard manner.

Chilka stopped producing salt, and the ports of Puri were abandoned in the late 1800s. During this period, the government demonstrated little interest in growing markets. Even so, this town remained an important trading centre after ports that depended mostly on pilgrims failed. Hindu Rajas' capital city of Khurda developed into a major centre of trade and commerce. This area is well positioned to facilitate the easy transportation of agricultural and forest goods from multiple regions. The items were dispatched to the towns of Puri and Cuttack. Khurda served as a significant commercial hub until the introduction railway line, at which point the center was relocated to the Jatni Railway Station.In addition to Purl and Khurda, there were several other commercial hubs like as Astaranga, Balugaon, Balakati, Gope, and Pipili. Pipili flourished as a haven for the pilgrims who sought refuge there during their journey to Puri. Balakati served as a hub for the production of kitchenware made from bell metal and brass.[11] The merchants from the Tributary Mahals would frequently visit this bazaar to procure kitchenware. These significant locations provided favourable conditions for the expansion of economic endeavours among the residents and traders of the Puri district.[12] Each administrative division of the district had a variety of headgear that served as feeder markets.

The markets and marketing system have consistently contributed to the economic well-being of the people of Odisha. The expansion of markets was correlated with the transportation infrastructure such as roads and trains, which facilitated the cost-effective transportation of commodities produced or manufactured in rural areas to urban centers. Both the delivery of completed goods to consumers and the transit of raw materials to producers would be hampered by poorly built roadways. As such, Orlssan's economy went through a phase of low growth overall.

Impact of the Commercial Policy

Due to intense competition among businesses, the merchants of Odisha were unable to gain a significant

advantage. They lacked the wealth to compete with foreign merchants, faced increasing prices for commodities, had limited access to water routes, and were unable to utilize railways. In addition to the existing backwardness of the people of Odisha, the Government has implemented new taxes on various items at different intervals in order to generate additional money.[13] The Government had shown indifference and passivity towards the economic underdevelopment of the people over the course of the century. The commercial activity of the people of Odisha reduced as a consequence.

In the first half of the 19th century, the East India Company Government had a monopoly on the export and import trade. The latter part of the 19th century witnessed a significant and remarkable surge in both export and import trade as a result of enhanced internal connection and port infrastructure development in the aftermath of years of famine. The aspiration of transforming the underdeveloped, secluded, and insignificant rural into a thriving and lucrative commerce hub, so revolutionizing the province's economy, was not achieved.

The inhabitants exhibited no indication of affluence and luxury. The occurrence was a result of the province's limited trade, which focused mostly on exporting food grains and other raw materials, a matter of great interest to the government, while importing completed goods.[14] The enhancement of communication and the building of consistent commercial connections with various locations served as a safeguard against future famine by facilitating the mobilization of labour and the importing of food grains from other regions. The growth of railroads contributed to the mobilization of workers even more. It demonstrated a clear structure of colonial rule in line with British theory. The impacted populace was able to look for food and employment in urban regions because to improvements in communication infrastructure.

The evolution of market networks and urban centers in colonial Odisha represents significant dimensions of the region’s economic, social and spatial transformation under British rule. The expansion of commercial activities, restructuring of traditional market systems, agricultural commercialization and development of transport infrastructure collectively influenced the changing the economic landscape of the region. The growing connectivity between rural markets, coastal markets and inland trading centers facilitated the movement of agricultural commodities while contributing to the emergence and expansion of important urban centers across the state of Odisha. [15]

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