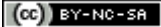


*Barnaparichay – A mall in progress, a street in transition*

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SubVersions | Vol.1, Issue.1, (2013), 122- 145.

Url: <http://subversions.tiss.edu/?p=104>

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## **Abstract**

In his *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin depicted how urban spaces contributed to the growth of the city's intellectual life and the 'flaneur', or the experiential stroller through the city's streets. Urban spaces, particularly streets, argues Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*, are abstract spaces that include the "world of commodities". In this context, College Street in Kolkata, as an urban space, has contributed immensely to the cultural and intellectual life of the city. This place known as 'boipara', loosely translated as 'neighbourhood of books', has its streets and serpentine lanes lined with pavement bookshops mostly selling second hand books. The spatial order might change completely with the completion of a 'book mall' coming up across the street that is meant to relocate the entire market, including the pavement bookshops, in its built environs.

In this paper I wish to examine the politics of the changing spatial order in Indian cities, post-liberalisation, with particular reference to College Street. The spatial reconstruction of College Street is largely reliant on the changing logic of culture and consumption post-liberalisation. I would also try to examine whether this 'logic of culture' is creating a new spatial order in our cities, which is creating 'sanitised spaces' for elite consumption. I would also argue through the paper that there is a politico-economic superstructure that legitimises this conception of the new urban spaces in a post-reform 'global city'. Finally, I wish to look into the changing role of the pedestrian/'flaneur' through their access to these spaces in the city.

**Keywords** – urban spaces, streets, spatial order post-liberalisation, College Street, Kolkata, Barnaparichay book mall.

I<sup>1</sup> was greeted with a structure in College Street whose existence I was unaware of when I went in 2007<sup>2</sup>. At first I thought that they were trying to break down the College Street market and sell it to a private developer because the government had done the same to the Park Circus Market<sup>3</sup>. But when I asked a few people here and there what was going on, I was in for a surprise. They told me that the College Street *boipara*<sup>4</sup> was supposed to be relocated in its entirety to the mall. It was as if the street would be transported to a mall.

This was the first reaction that was elicited out of Prateek Karmakar (27), now a research fellow in a university in West Bengal, who used to frequent College Street for his routine hunt for rare books as well as his regular session of *adda* with friends from Presidency College. He shared his experience of how he felt when he had heard it for the first time that the College Street *boipara* was supposed to be relocated to a book-mall on the other side of

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<sup>1</sup> A draft of this paper was published in Global South E-Sephis magazine Vol. 9 No.3 (July 2013) and can be found here. <<http://sephisemagazine.org/past/vol9-no3-july-2013.html>>

<sup>2</sup> Research Note: The interviews, field notes and participant observation for the paper/thesis was carried out during the period September 2010 – November 2011. The observations and findings might not have become dated but some of the finer points might have changed, owing to a changing urban landscape and the particular street. The mall, however, is still under construction and none of the pavement booksellers have shifted anywhere else.

<sup>3</sup>The Park Circus Market, located in the South-Central neighbourhood of Park Circus in Kolkata, is one of the 22 Municipal markets owned by the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC). In 2007, the ruling Left-Front government decided to re-develop the dilapidated structure of the market. There was a bidding process which was won by Reliance Retail Ltd and Reliance Engineering Associates Pvt. Ltd, both subsidiaries of Mukesh Ambani-controlled Reliance Industries. The Market was given to them on a 99-year lease for redevelopment where they would also have to rehabilitate 400 licensed traders from the existing KMC market. Till date, not much has progressed on the ground because the government and Reliance Industries have not reached a consensus on the issue of sale and purchase of farm produce from the renovated market.

<sup>4</sup> *Boipara* (Bengali) roughly translates into a ‘neighbourhood of books’ where *boi* stands for books and *para* stands for neighbourhood. The term is often used to refer to the book market in College Street and surrounding by-lanes. It brings a familiarity of surroundings to the street – the *para* indicating that it could be treated like an extension of the private.

College Street demolishing the old College Street market. And he was certain that his reaction of horror and nostalgia were not his alone.

Though he rightly points out through his concerns that College Street as a space was unique not just in Kolkata, but also in India, the largely-circulated myth that an urban space called College Street remained the same through the turn of the century was not quite true. In fact during the reign of the Congress government in 1960s a first Basic Development Plan (BDP) was created by the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organisation (CMPO) to plan the areas differently from what was already done by the British during their reign<sup>5</sup>. The myth of a statist situation with respect to the street was probably kept alive in popular discourse by invoking the image of ‘this exotic place full of intellectual activity’<sup>6</sup> while all these physical changes were already being conceived.

The myth assumed different proportions with the announcement by the Government of West Bengal that it wished to relocate the entire College Street *boipara* in a mall that was going to come up across the street<sup>7</sup>. The mall was to be constructed after demolishing the dilapidated structure of the College Street Market that was one of the 13 Municipal Markets that were

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<sup>5</sup> An integrated plan to tackle urban development in Kolkata and surrounding municipal areas was drawn up in 1966. This project to conceive a Basic Development Plan (BDP), supported by the Ford Foundation was conceived to improve the basic urban amenities in the urban areas. The idea of the project was to strengthen civic infrastructure coupled with a thrust to improve the economic base of the city. College Street, as a market area featured in the list of improvement projects. For more, see Bagchi, Amaresh., 1987. “Planning for Metropolitan Development: Calcutta's Basic Development Plan”. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 22 (14): 597-601.

<sup>6</sup> College Street as a space upholding the Bengali culture is still a powerful image often used in songs and literature. This is important to invoke the image repeatedly, so much so that change sometimes gets unnoticed and poorly represented in popular culture.

<sup>7</sup> See Express News Service, 2003. Now College Street set to have country's first book mall. *The Sunday Express*. (February 06).

built during the colonial period<sup>8</sup>. Since College Street market was a heritage structure the mall that was to be built had to keep the spire of the erstwhile market in accordance with the rules of re-developing a heritage property. The contract for developing the new mall was given to Bengal Shelter Housing Development Limited, a company that was formed under a joint venture by the Government of West Bengal and Samar Nag, a Bengali entrepreneur in a private-public partnership with the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC). The mall was named *Barnaparichay*<sup>9</sup> – keeping in mind a long history and association that Bengal had with the written and spoken word.

The ground floor of the mall was supposed to relocate all the shops and establishments that were already there in the existing College Street Municipal market. They had been temporarily relocated to a different place called Marquis Square very close to the present College Street market. The first and the second floors were supposed to be sold as premium retail space to big branded bookstores that would set their flagship showrooms there much in the lines of Barnes and Noble<sup>10</sup> in the US. The top floors were supposed to contain all the second hand bookshops that until then were located in the sidewalks of College Street. They would be given shops proportionate to the area that they occupied back then and none of the pavement book would be denied a store. In the initial plan that was communicated to the

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<sup>8</sup> The 13 Municipal Markets referred to here were built during the British period (pre-1947). Most of them are old structures and have been declared heritage buildings. The KMC now operates 7 more markets, taking the number of Municipal Markets to 22. For more, see Chaudhuri, Sukanta, 1990. *Calcutta - The Living City Volume I The Past*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>9</sup> *Barnaparichay* (Bengali) is the first book of grammar that is given to Bengali-speaking children to learn the Bengali alphabet. The book is the culmination and documentation of the efforts of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, the Bengali reformist, who sought to reconstruct the Bengali alphabet into 12 vowels and 40 consonants. The book mall draws its name from this book because of its immediate and popular association with knowledge in the mother tongue.

<sup>10</sup> Barnes and Noble is the largest book retailer in the United States of America. They own large-format bookstores and expand their business through acquisition of smaller and independent book-stores. Their flagship store is located in Fifth Avenue, Manhattan.

media, there was also a site where book auctions could take place. On top of all this, there would also be a world class auditorium where book release functions and other cultural programs could be held. The mall would also have a dedicated space for an art gallery that would provide the Bengali book reader a chance to interact with fine art along with books. Along with all the paraphernalia associated with the modern book industry, the mall would also house a place for restoration and conservation of books where damaged books from libraries would be given a facelift. To complete the entire experience, the architects and planners also conceived of an archive and a training school dedicated to printing and publishing. In order to recreate the charm of the Indian Coffee House it would also have a dedicated food court<sup>11</sup>.

### **The ‘mall’ in Bengali culture – *its symbolisms***

In terms of production of a different socio-cultural space, it might be important to question the place of a mall in the culture of Bengal. Though the advent of malls came during the 90s in the rest of the country, malls are a fairly recent addition to the geography of Kolkata, the first mall being built around 2003 in Elgin Road. Therefore malls as a destination for shopping is not a very old thing for the population in Kolkata. In that context, a book mall might stand out even as a proposition because the very idea of a mall selling books is complex when placed in the framework of global commodity culture<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> This can be seen in the planning document. The website of Bengal Shelter Housing Development Company has the preliminary floor plan of the book mall. Go to [www.bengalshelter.com](http://www.bengalshelter.com).

<sup>12</sup> The change in the pattern of selling and buying books cannot be isolated from the changes in the global consumption pattern. It is not clear at this point whether the book is treated as a non-commercialised aesthetic like high-art is and therefore its implications on commodity culture are subject to contestations. Though Jon Goss (1993) argues about creation of a space that satisfies individual and mass consumers, it is not clear if the

The idea of the mall originates from a mixed used development of the downtown area and therefore there are lots of things that are there in the mall apart from the shops and establishments selling various products<sup>13</sup>. The ‘book’ as a commodity needs to be conceived within the environs of a culture that is constantly being refashioned and remodelled according to the socio-political changes that are happening on the state or at the national level. If one cannot place the book as a commodity within the structure of the mall and define the socio-cultural aesthetics it is associated with, chances are that the customer might find making meaning out of it uncomfortable as well.

The present circumstances of market-driven capitalism assumes that material and symbolic production are bearers of the same site – that social subjects and the objects to be consumed are both produced there. The mall, in general probably performs that function but it would be interesting to note how it would change when it is placed in the context of the book as the primary commodity. This means that the consumer is not just engaged in an activity of consumption but also engaged in meaning making through that act. Arghya Sen (54), a college professor, notes,

I do not feel that the mall has any place for a book. The malls that I have been to are often too noisy and therefore even if there are bookshops you do not feel like going inside them. I also feel a little intimidated when I want to go inside them. You could call it my presumption but somewhere I feel that books are meant to be taken very seriously and buying it is a *more* serious affair. And the mall is not at all a place

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book as a commodity will manipulate tastes differently when placed in a mall. For more, see Goss, Jon., 1993. The "Magic of the Mall". *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 83 (1), 18-47.

<sup>13</sup> The mall, as it stands today, is conceived like a destination for the entire day. So there are options to eat out, watch movies at a multiplex or unwind in a lounge apart from the bouquet of shops that are present in the market. This is largely done to engage the consumer through all the means of receiving pleasure – through commercial choices.

where serious activities can take place. In fact, I was shocked when my son bought a book from Big Bazaar<sup>14</sup> that day. I could not even imagine that books were sold with clothes and vegetables.

One can try and understand the source of Arghya Sen's anxiety. The anxiety is largely born out of the failure to ascertain the commodity nature of a book. He cannot relate to this culture because consumption is value-driven and loaded with meanings. Buying a cake and buying a book is not one and the same thing. Since this kind of conspicuous consumption might have negative responses owing to *this* lack of proper meaning, the designers of any mall try to create spaces that are different from being mere centres of consumption. It is built to create an environment so that one can dissociate from the act of shopping. But when it comes to a very involved shopping experience like buying a book then this argument might not stand good because the very nature of buying a book is different from buying apparel or furniture, making it a different experience.

It is probably from this grain of argument that Arghya Sen's concern of the book losing its serious nature in a mall arises from. Every commodity has some symbolic expression ascribed to it by its perceived use and that attachment also gives meanings to the commodity culture around it. The book reader appropriates a certain meaning out of the very design of the mall and the location of the book in it that also affects the way the reader will engage with the very act of reading – which is one of the key elements that determines how books will be bought and sold.

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<sup>14</sup> Big Bazaar is an Indian chain of hypermarket stores that offer a wide range of merchandise right from clothes to furniture to books. A brand of the Future Group, at present, it operates 214 stores in India.



### **The relic of the second hand book – an attempt to fossilise?**

The book mall also seeks to immortalise the idea of the second hand bookshop by keeping in its plans the idea of maintaining the culture that has already become a legendary part of College Street. All the visible traits that make up the popular imagination of College Street would be maintained. But this could also be interpreted as an attempt to redefine a past in such a way that it loses its ability to make transitions over time. The book bazaar in the mall would try and retain the character of the original street market but whether this is an appropriation of popular culture by the elite and consequently an exercise of power is something that would have to be studied. This is what a book seller, Rakhil Mondal (45), had to say,

Even if we are given our own space in the book mall, we will only stand out amid the otherwise fancy areas in the mall. The street has a much grounded feeling to it – and hawking has always been a part and parcel of people in the street. It is highly unlikely that the same conditions of the street will be present in the mall. And anyway, I do not understand what the need for recreating the market is.

An attempt to recreate the street market within the mall poses the risk of becoming a symbol of cultural preservation. Cultural preservation in itself is not problematic but when it is applied to a vibrant place like College Street – which is very alive – it poses the risk of creating spaces that are caught in a time warp. The street is important in the context of the book as a commodity as it allows divergent agents to be represented through a transaction. The street recognises differences because it brings people from different social strata. This is not just an exercise in social mobility but the street does extrapolate the multi-layeredness of

the city in the space of the book-market itself<sup>15</sup>. Since the mall will not have the socio-cultural realities of the street within its built environment the street bookstores in the mall will become edicts of a crafts museum, because they will most likely not respond to the changes that will be happening to the world of learning and culture outside.

Moreover, the street bookstores are always seen as defying the system because they almost operate at the margins of the well established publishing industry. Their presence on the street itself can be seen as an attempt to create alternate spaces of dissemination of knowledge and sometimes dissent in an otherwise conformist world. Their ways of procuring books from non-traditional sources, sometimes from customers themselves and their pricing with respect to demand is a unique sub-culture in itself. Their business model stands as a resistance against the way the big, large format bookstores operate because it largely depends on your procuring power, good will and cooperation with other second hand bookstores. But with such actions like the stores being relocated to the mall they run the risk of being co-opted into the system and being dominated by the codes that govern the business elsewhere. This will not only hamper their business but rupture the codes of consumption and imagination that go against the normative grain of things. The second hand bookshops may be forced to follow the mainstream in order to survive in the business.

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<sup>15</sup> The *boipara* is not only about the *flaneur* or the second hand books. There are several agents, often from different social backgrounds that interact within the space of College Street. This confluence disrupts certainties of social behavior where we are prone to interact with people from similar socio-economic backgrounds. This creates alternate spaces of sharing knowledge, thus contributing to the popular knowledge of the street. The mall, by design, poses the risk of excluding several agents because of its obvious segregation of agents by dint of their socio-economic position. One is not saying that the mall might not create alternate paradigms of knowledge sharing, but one is just articulating the risks involved in changing from one form of social conditioning to the other.

The book mall has tried to re-create the *space* of the street book culture by hosting an event called the *Sharod Boi Parbon*<sup>16</sup> in September 2009 in the premises of the book mall. This was an event that was a precursor to the Puja celebrations in Kolkata and hosted a book fair in the same way that it is held annually in Kolkata. Many of the publishers were invited and so were the smaller booksellers. Samar Nag, the owner of Bengal Shelter, the company that is building the mall, took personal interest in the entire affair. He said later, that this was their attempt at maintaining the cultural heritage and tradition of College Street in the modern environs of an under-construction mall.

### ***Dewa Newa*<sup>17</sup> – The curious case of College Street**

The act of buying and selling itself becomes very important when discussing the change in urban space in Kolkata. The researcher did ethnography of the street and while doing so observed the process of shopping in the street for over two hours<sup>18</sup>. This was done from a vantage point sitting at a particular stall adjacent to the gates of Presidency College. The buyer's negotiation with the street creates ruptures within the assumption of the superior knowledge of the shopkeeper or of the book-buyer. The way the pedestrian – buyer engaged with the urban-scape brings into the forefront the very way in which the urban spaces are conceived and planned.

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<sup>16</sup> *Sharod Boi Parbon* (Bengali) is a book fair that is held on the eve of Durga Puja, one of the largest religious and cultural festivals held in Bengal, generally in the month of September-October.

<sup>17</sup> *Dewa Newa* (Bengali) translates into giving and taking. It is often used to mean a transaction, commercial or otherwise.

<sup>18</sup> This is the duration of the ethnography done to study transaction only at one particular row of shops. This is not a measure of the duration of the entire data collection period.

There was a steady stream of people who visited the street. The particular shop where I was seated was visited by at least ten groups of buyers – seven of them were visibly college students and two of them were parents of students. The remaining one was a professor who had come looking for a rare book that he had ordered a few days back. Most of the groups of students who had come looking for books were sure of what they wanted and they looked for the exact thing that they wanted. It is common knowledge in College Street that buyers entering the street from Mahatma Gandhi Road will be questioned on their requirements by the shops that are situated at the beginning of the street. By the time they reach this shop they would have already visited two or three shops as this shop was situated a bit far from the Mahatma Gandhi Road crossing. Six out of the seven groups carried a small piece of paper where they had written the names of the books that they were looking for – as that would ease the task of calling out the names of the books at every shop. They would generally greet the shopkeeper and there was a certain degree of familiarity with most of the shopkeepers. This showed that at least four out of the seven groups were regulars at the College Street book shops. The shopkeepers were quite forthcoming to most of the students. The search for a book from their end was also quite elaborate. If a particular book was not available with them then one would have to wait at the bookshop itself – at least the person at the bookshop where I was seated managed to cajole almost every customer to wait. The bookshop owner would send someone across all the stores to find if that particular title was available with anyone else and if it was available, then they would source it from there and give it to the customer. This would actually save the customer some time and actually buy the particular shopkeeper some more time for the customer to sift through other titles in that time. Almost three out of the five times that this happened, the customers ended up buying something else from the bookstore apart from the book that they had come in to buy.

Price is always a sensitive issue in College Street – especially because of two reasons that are connected to each other. And I would argue that both end up defining a particular aspect of College Street as an urban space and its access to multiple agents. My observation at the College Street bookshop showed that bargaining for the perfect price for a second hand book or even a new book is generally managed by the women if there are female students in the group. This haggling over the price lends itself to curious peculiarities with regard to the idea of ‘culture’ and ‘consumption’. The booksellers have to always remember that they are dealing with students, both school and college going, who are very cautious about spending money. They cannot force the customer – the particular student group - to pay a large sum because it might prove detrimental to the very nature of their business, that of aiding in the dissemination of knowledge for generations of college and university students. On several occasions while I was observing the transaction, students ended up saying, “*Eta amader jaiga. Tomra amader jaigai amaderi keno thokabe?* (This is our space. Why would you cheat us *here?*) An argument about the price draws its arguments about ‘who’ the space of College Street belongs to. Representation is always problematic and in this case it unveils important questions about citizenship and belonging in the city – a space that is contested both intellectually and economically by both book-sellers and book-buyers. The bookseller often retorts to this argument by an equally problematic axiom that the researcher observed was used almost thrice in retaliating the arguments of the customer in terms of the price that was being asked for.

*Ei biota'r bichar apni daam'e korte parben na. Ei boitar ashole kono daam hoi na.*

This amazing piece of conversation roughly translates as – You cannot judge this book on the basis of its price. It is rather ‘priceless’. In Bengali, the word ‘daam’ means the price of a particular commodity. But its usage in a different context – ‘*kono daam*’ – would mean that it

is priceless. This particular claim by the bookseller that a book in College Street is priceless originates out of their imagination of the urban space. The underlying assumption to this logic is that books are not just a commodity; they are cultural products and the pillars of knowledge and civilisation. They embody the very intellectual fabric of the urban space and the bookseller does not shy away from reminding the customer that very fact, in the process making his presence on the street felt. His only rejoinder to this argument is that he has to charge a higher price sometimes in order to sustain the business and bring better books for sale in the street, thus ‘enriching’ the culture further.

In the context of this discussion, it is also important to understand that College Street is not just a buyer’s market but it is also a seller’s market where the customer also sells a lot of the books that one would otherwise discard as trash. Customers often get a fair price for the books that they would otherwise sell to the trash collectors who visit houses and apartments to collect trash to give them to the municipality in return for some money. This sort of double agency of the buyer and the seller, and its role reversal also dislodges the idea of a particular space of shopping being occupied by one single entity. This also helps define the space better as one cannot deny that there is the lack of a uni-lateral direction flow of information. Rather than the construction of a binary, in College Street, both the buyer and the seller end up as agents of multiple layers of consumption.

### **College Street: the flow in the street**

The question of the mall within the College Street area should also be understood in terms of the flow of people and other elements in the process of consumption in the street that it is going to contribute to. It would be interesting to note how people/customers would react to

the space that is being created in a completely opposite way to the way readers are used to seeing in the College Street area. The space of the College Street boipara is largely a horizontal space that is spread across several pavements and other alleys that spread around College Street. There are areas earmarked for particular books – second hand, literary, chapbooks, school textbooks, though this demarcation is informal. This horizontal space can be accessed in a particular way and its geographic dimensions imagined in a flat surface. But the mall by design will have to be vertically aligned, due to the lack of space in expanding horizontally and there will be newer geographic negotiations within the mall that will determine where particular stalls are placed and where large bookstores operate. The pedestrian will have to allow himself/herself to expose their imagination to the different dimensional qualities of the changed space to allow this kind of an arrangement to work. Since the mall largely caters largely to a middle class imagination, it is built like an idealised social space. For decoding this idealised space, one has to depend on a system of signs<sup>19</sup> that allow one to negotiate the space of the mall with the knowledge of that changed space. Thus the creation of the book mall and the relocation of the second hand bookshops would form a visual change in how people will access urban space.

According to Turner (1982), the marketplace is a “liminoid zone”<sup>20</sup>, where potentiality can be questioned by the diverse forms of human interaction and where within confined public

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<sup>19</sup> This system of signs includes the way a mall is conceived of as a controlled space. The system of signs include implicit control mechanisms in the design of the mall – escalators that alternate in order to prevent the shopper moving quickly between floors or the large amount of distance covered to find an escalator or lift. The semiotics could change depending on the nature of the product or the pattern of consumption. In *Barnaparichay*, this system of signs is likely to re-create the idea of a spontaneous, social space like the street that it derives its cultural quotient from.

<sup>20</sup> The market has always been defined as a liminal space, since it occupies a fraught territory between the local and the global. Turner (1982) calls this a “liminoid zone” because the certainty of events can be questioned through the prospects of sudden meetings and interactions, assertion of the rights to public space and freedom of expression. The attempt to engage with this on a theoretical level is prompted by the urgency to find out whether the mall has that immense ‘possibility’ that is latent in every public space. See Turner, V, 1982. *From ritual to*

spaces, there is the opportunity to meet without prior notice. The marketplace also has the potential for assertion of collective rights or subversion of existing hegemonic beliefs. College Street market, as a space, performs the very same functions wherein it allows the pedestrian the possibility of creation<sup>21</sup> outside the existing discourse. Largely, because of the multiple layers of information that flows in College Street, there is no fear of moral censure or functional surveillance. The mall and its built environs stand antithetical to this very flow of human beings. The mall could impose one meaning through its network of street-like geography – whereas College Street gives the sense of open-endedness. The street and its endlessness contribute to the democratisation process of *boipara* where it is possible to escape the truth sanctioned by power. In the mall, the reader will largely be confined to the meaning making of the larger forces in operation.

### **The voices from the street: small and marginal book-sellers**

The success and functioning of the book mall would largely depend on how the second hand booksellers or even the marginal booksellers selling new books organise their spaces and the wares around several motivating factors. But when I was conducting my research, my formal and informal interviews with the street booksellers revealed that a large part of them had not booked a stall in the new mall. In fact there was not a single shopkeeper who told me that he was shifting to the book mall. Some of them had definitely approached the builders but they had not finalised the deal at all. The two factors that were prohibiting the shopkeepers from

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*theatre*. New York: Performing Arts Publication; and Chakravarty, Dipesh., 1992. Of Garbage, Modernity and the Citizen's Gaze. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 27 (10/11): 541-547.

<sup>21</sup> Creation in this context is the articulation of the agency that is derived from the space of the traditional market – that is largely free from institutional surveillance, the kind of which is employed by the mall.



taking up shop at the new mall were the cost of the new shop and the spatial allocation of the new shops in the mall.

In order to place the discussion in context, it is important to understand the present situation of the market and the way it operates now. The market is divided into three parts – the large bookstores, the footpath bookstores who sell new books and finally, the second hand bookshops. The large bookstores are largely family owned and therefore run as family establishments. The shops selling new books on the pavement are largely owned by the shopkeeper himself. The second hand bookstores on the other hand, in some of the cases, are not owned by the shopkeeper. The person behind the counter is only managing the store. The shops are provided a license by the Kolkata Municipal Corporation from 2005 onwards which is renewed every year. They have a fixed electricity line with a common meter from the CESC (Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation) and the electricity bill is generally shared among all the shops equally. There are six unions in the College Street *boipara* – and the areas that they cover are dependent on the lanes that they are operating their establishments in. The unions are managed by the shopkeepers themselves with very little interference from the established political parties.

Given this context, there must not be sufficient incentive for the shopkeeper for shifting to the space allocated for them in the book mall. This is what Srikanta Ghosh (47), a bookseller selling second hand literature books, had to say,

In the College Street area, the booksellers generally operate on a very slim margin. Most of the shopkeepers have a very low working capital. In fact, even though I have this stall for around 14 years (he bought this stall from the original owner for around 2.5 lakhs, he clarified later) I cannot say that I have amassed a lot of cash to buy another shop. I have daily sales of around two to three thousand rupees but that

is just sufficient to sustain my family. The exorbitant price that they (the mall authorities) are asking for booking a new stall is turning off most of the shopkeepers even if they would have booked a stall considering the pros and cons.

The research revealed that the booking amount for a space of 120 square foot space in the mall was around ten to twelve lakh rupees. This seemed like an amount that was difficult for any of these businessmen to pay. But if no one was indeed taking up space inside the mall then the entire logic behind the redevelopment would have to be dismantled. Moreover, the bookshops clarified that no one from the side of the mall had actually approached them for taking up space – which could indeed be seen as a possible change of plans.

The spatial allocation of the bookstores in the new mall is also relevant in the present context. Most of the second hand booksellers revealed that the space that was reserved for them was in the fifth and sixth floor of the mall building. According to them it would be highly detrimental to the entire cause of relocating the shopkeepers in the mall. Horen Samanta, (62), a pavement bookseller, said,

If customers have to go to the fifth floor to find a book then chances are most of them would not even think of doing that. The ease with which we operate our business now on the street is missing in that mall. The planners are failing to understand we are a business depending on passing pedestrians. The second hand bookshops would be marginalised because they would have no way to attract their readers in this way.

According to several other bookshop owners there is a hidden bias towards the large format bookstores that might be allocated space inside the mall. This is probably also due to their marginal existence in the entire publishing industry that they are pushed to positions of

disadvantage from where it would be difficult to conduct their business. The fact that they could not change the space allocated for them and had to back out also goes to show that their power of negotiation with authorities is limited.

There is also an apparent ignorance on the part of the planners in understanding the manner in which the pavement booksellers sell books. They are not dependant on captive customers, like one in a mall would depend on, but they are more interested in getting the attention of pedestrians in the street. In the absence of such a setting there would be no movement of people from the lower floors to the higher floors where the booksellers have been offered space. The flow of the street is such that the consumption is one of immediate gratification, because it depends on the spectacle of the moment, in this case, of a particular book or document. This spectacle of the moment has the potential to dominate over the lived experience of the moment<sup>22</sup> – thus forcing the hurrying pedestrian to stop at a particular pavement bookshop and pick up the book that he/she desires.

### **View of the street – large bookstores**

In the discussion of the space that will be built in the book mall, the perspective of the big family owned bookstores should also be considered. There were mixed feelings even among the large bookstores because even they were not very sure of the contribution that the mall was going to make to the overall environment of the culture in Bengal. Among the large bookstores, Chakroborty, Chatterjee and Co., when interviewed was really apprehensive

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<sup>22</sup> Guy Debord in his book *Society of Spectacle* writes about the spectacle of the commodity. This has been drawn from there though the researcher only partially agrees to his claim that the spectacle causes images that are projected above the real world. Though he makes his argument on the basis on his understanding of commodity-fetishism, I would argue that the same logic might not work in the case of books as a commodity, which has larger cultural implications ranging from class to social and intellectual mobility. See Debord, Guy, 2002. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Canberra: Treason Press.

because they felt that the move would not do them any good. The store, which completed a hundred years in 2010, was among the oldest bookshops in College Street. What Paresh Mazumder, (34), one of the present owners of the store said is important to contextualise the discussion in terms of the stance of the large family owned bookshops in the street.

It does not make sense for us to go into the mall because we realise that we will be placed in a very precarious position with all the other bookstores vying for the same reader and with probably a better ambience. In here the ambience we offer is that of a hundred year old bookstore that has a history of its own. That *itself* attracts so many people that it would be almost suicidal to move into another area.

He made it clear that the only option that was available was to buy a godown in the same place so that they could use it as an extra space to stock all the books that were lying scattered all around the space. Though the establishment is quite old, they have made a space for displaying books in the top floor of the same building where customers can choose the books for themselves. According to him, the buyer is very discerning and the mall might not change anything in the present urban space in College Street because they might go to the same bookstores that are known for their goodwill over the years. He also feels that the way the mall will change the urban space of College Street will largely depend on whether it can actually cater to a different profile of customers with disparate consumption patterns.

This discussion can be carried forward with the help of the large format bookstores elsewhere in the city who might take up space in the mall. Interestingly, two of the biggest chains of bookstores – Oxford and Crossword have not booked any space in the upcoming mall, at least till the time that this research was being conducted. This was interesting because if the big bookstores had not taken up shops in the mall, then it was doubtful that the character of the street and its present market of books would change. It is largely acknowledged that the large

format bookstores cater to a more upscale customer who is aware and can afford the ambience that is offered by these bookstores. The presence of upmarket coffee shops in these bookstores<sup>23</sup> is proof that they try and create a complete experience for the customer. This was echoed in the words of Rahul Sen, (37), Deputy Manager (Retail Operations) of Crossword's Eastern India Operations.

I believe that the reader who is coming to Crossword is making an informed choice to buy into a complete experience of an environment and not just buying a book. We are not vying for a store in the book mall in College Street because we somehow do not fit into the character of the street itself. For us, it is important to maintain the positioning that we have at present. This does not mean we are underestimating College Street as an urban space contributing to the overall interest for books in Kolkata. It has a different charm of its own and we are not competing with that space ever.

The large format bookstores thus acknowledge the contribution of College Street to the culture of learning in the city but are reluctant to move into the College Street area. This has largely to do with the reader who accesses spaces differently and their relationship with these spaces is probably different due to their societal implications. Comparing the experience of College Street with a large format bookstore chain, Probal Das, (34), a research fellow, said,

I was looking for the book on Kolkata street names by P. Thankkapan Nair. When I went to this particular store in Park Street the guy manning the counter had not even heard of such a book. He had to check so many times in the directory of the

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<sup>23</sup> Both the flagship stores of Oxford Bookstore in Park Street and Crossword in Elgin Road have up-scale spaces for socialisation. While Crossword boasts of a cafeteria in the top floor of the store building, Oxford has a 'chai-bar' dedicated to aficionados of the beverage. They have a contribution to the over-all socio-cultural aesthetic of the bookstore – as it determines who accesses these spaces.

computer just to get the name right. When I went to College Street, and told them what I wanted, the man smilingly brought out a 1990 copy of the book. It was frayed and soiled at places but you do not mind that because the shopkeeper is probably as knowledgeable as you are and equally enthusiastic about the book.

This reaction can be traced back to the old reader – bookseller ties that operate at the heart of the College Street *boipara*. This is probably not operational in a space like the mall where there are abstract spaces created so that the physical spaces are not easily accessed by all and therefore commercial capitalism can operate in these areas.

Personally, I would not mind going to the book mall once it is built. But I am not sure whether I would want to buy any books from there. The people of College Street know books like the back of their palm, and more importantly you are in the company of others like you. That makes every visit to College Street rewarding.

The response of Satwick, (25), a young university student, shows that the hunt for books still remains an exercise in personal expression and a form of public behaviour in terms of accessing spaces. Though the concerns of the reader are largely *agoraphilic*<sup>24</sup>, not all of them express similar concerns.

The conception of the book mall has a recurring theme – that of a nostalgia for the traditional public marketplace, one that is epitomised by the College Street *boipara*. This idealised marketplace is born out of an intimate popular knowledge of the street. A part of the anxiety

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<sup>24</sup> Agoraphilia might have other meanings and usage, but this is largely drawn from the work of Jon Goss (1993) who defines as nostalgia for the traditional marketplace in our conception of modern shopping centres. See Goss, Jon. (1993). The "Magic of the Mall". *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 83 (1): 18-47.

comes from the loss to the iconography of College Street that has been assembled from popular culture. As an urban space, College Street still remains largely amorphous, open to our own signification – the character of which might change with *Barnaparichay*. This transition will not be isolated but will definitely carry larger socio-political implications on the cultural practices in Bengal. Probably that is the greater anxiety that dominates the cultural landscape of Kolkata.

### **Bio note**

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