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The Colonial Marketplace: Renegotiating Trade and Religion

Siddhi Deshmukh
Undergraduate Student,
St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Mumbai,
Email- siddhi.deshmukh@xaviers.edu.in
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Abstract
From antiquarian times to contemporary times, India has always been a hub for trans-cultural interactions. In the wake of its dynamic history and strategic geographical location, the Indian marketplace, especially in colonial times, was never truly a local event. A colonial marketplace in India operated through a complex, transnational identity, featuring a myriad of goods, ranging from food, clothing, medicine, toys, beauty products etc. This allowed for the intersection of ideas, linguistic practices, and various art styles. The colonial marketplace, in this context, becomes a crucial site for the interaction of the spheres of religion, trade and ideology. While introducing new commodities (namely, tea), these spaces introduced new social and moral dilemmas that unsettled existing frameworks pertaining to religion or ethics. Moreover, these sites were also emblematic of the European idea of modernity, preaching the distinct narrative of developmentalism, which the colonised India was slowly becoming susceptible to. Texts such as Rabindranath Tagore's Ghaire-Bhaire, and Premchand's Shatranj Ke Khiladi reflect the broader societal tension oscillating between an attraction to Western modernity while also seeking to retain their indigenous traditions. Within this framework, the paper seeks to analyze how the colonial marketplace functioned as a site for the renegotiation of the factors of religion, trade and identity. By reading the above mentioned texts as literary and social evidence of this pervasive thought, this paper argues that the colonial marketplace served as catalyst for notable shifts that impact our lives today- namely, the Swadeshi Movement and the revival of the modern Hindu identity.
***Keywords**: colonial marketplace, modernity, Swadeshi movement, religion and trade, colonial India*

Epigraph:
I've forgotten my errand; I float now through
myself like a howl through a phantom mouth—
the world's an illusory marketplace where I
must bargain hardest for what I hope I'm worth.
Russel Market by Maurya Simon

Introduction

Curiously enough, while the Indian bazaar, or the marketplace, has been romantically represented as the Oriental bazaar in colonial literature, it is an extremely undertheorized subject in India's cultural history. The marketplace never truly acquired a significant role in understanding Indian history, despite its enormous capacity to embody the prosaic, everyday and commercial experiences of various populations.

The history of the colonial marketplace can be conducted by studying the origins of commodities sold in the particular space, along with its history of extraction. To analyze the commodity and its history, one needs to understand this maxim: who bought, who sold and who consumed this commodity? This approach highlights the desires, fantasies, and above all, fears of the consumers, while allowing us to understand the motives and attitudes of the seller.

This essay will venture into the throes of this chaotic, wonderfully unknown space, and ultimately understand how the contents of the local bazaar in the modern colonial times aided in the interaction of the spheres of religion, trade and ideology. This essay will attempt to historically

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situate moral anxiety relating to the consumption of colonial commodities in literary texts such as Rabindranath Tagore's, *The Home and World*, and Premchand's *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* as literary evidence. Finally, this essay will argue that the marketplace and its goods essentially served as a catalyst in producing the *Swadeshi* movement, which eventually led to the reconfiguration of the modern Hindu identity.

To understand the ever-changing nature of the very goods placed for display in the colonial marketplace, one must venture to the primordial entity of life, and of trade – the ocean.

From Antiquity to Modernity

It all starts - and ends with - the Indian ocean. As J.H. Parry says, "All the seas of the worlds are one."[1] The ocean facilitated transnational exchange within the orbit of what Sugata Bose calls "comparable civilisations" such as "Islamic, Sanskritic Indian, Chinese, and Southeast Asian" (Bose 2009: 30).[2] Bose also writes that the inhabitants of the Indian ocean were in possession of Indian cottons that were sourced from the three major production centres of India – Gujarat, Coromandel, or Bengal (Bose 2009: 11).

As the bazaar developed through nodes of international exposure trade led to economic expansion, economic expansion led to political encroachment and political encroachment led to a complete, undivided takeover. Rajat Kanta Ray affirms "the imposition of the hegemony of Western capital" disrupted the much older Indian Ocean economy, thus thrusting the world into a complex "capitalist world economy". Furthermore, Ray believes that colonial expansion enshrined European capital at the top with the indigenous peasants, peddlers at the bottom. This removed the bazaar from an "atomistic person to person" mode of transactions (Bose 2009: 11–14). Thus, the colonial marketplace became a distinct capitalist phenomenon through western "impositions", otherwise known as imperialism.[3]

A year later, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, also resulted in an influx of British officials and visitors, especially women, into the Indian Subcontinent. This facilitated a whole new domestic sphere in which the availability of British commodities had become paramount.[4] The influx of foreign goods also enabled a class which sought to imitate everything English, and what they perceived to be characteristically modern, in contrast to what was the local practice (Sohoni 2023). This led to the rapid fading of traditional Indian industries, and introduced a specific brand of European consumerism giving rise to various commodities and the moral anxiety it would create.

Commodification of Modernity, and Moral Anxiety

Arjun Appadurai, reframes Marx's understanding of a commodity from a "product intended principally for exchange" emerging from an "institutional, psychological, and economic conditions of capitalism" to that of an object capable of "social potential" (Appadurai 1988: 6). In this case, the commodity emerged as a method for the British Empire to consolidate their legitimacy politically, economically, and above all culturally.

Perhaps, no other commodity represents history as illustratively as the Muslin cloth. Muslins from Dacca of the 17th and 18th centuries were coveted for the sheer pearly nature of the cloth, along with their lightness in weight. Indeed, in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, the knowledge of Indian muslin defines a gentleman's capacity to understand the opposite sex. Catherine Morland asks Henry Tilney: "Do you understand muslin, sir?" and he answers "Particularly well... I bought one for her the other day and it was pronounced to be a prodigious bargain by every lady who saw it. I gave but five shillings a yard for it and a true Indian muslin" (Austen 1818: 25-26).[5] Of course, readers from Commonwealth countries realise the dark subtext of this exchange, rooted in the mass acquisition of the materials needed to produce such cloth, and then sending the finished product back to the marketplaces of India at a much higher price. Lauren Miskin writes: "The Indian population that was once the exclusive producer of muslin likewise was transformed into a 'market' dependent upon the looms of their imperial oppressors" (Miskin 2015: 13).[6]

Britain's most notorious export, one that dominates our diets today – tea – is also a part of this discourse. Erika Rappaport writes: "Tea was a

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protagonist in a tale about commerce and Christianity, democracy, civility, and empire." Essentially, it was a nationalist symbol, used to reinforce an imagined supremacy (Rappaport 2017: 6). Tea is also largely associated with the violence (solely felt by Assam between the years of 1820s to 1870s) caused by Britain's efforts to introduce a consumer market. [7] During the nationalist movement, Gandhi condemned the drinking of British tea due to its history of labour exploitation.[8] Today, tea has acquired its own hybrid meaning, exuding a size of influence over what can be considered as the 'Indian' way of life. Therefore, the consumption and production of these commodities constitute a larger discourse around political and ideological legitimacy. Colonial commodities brought with itself an idea of colonial modernity, which Indian colonised subjects struggled to grasp, or reckon with. Thus, marketplaces and the commodities within them, things that seem humble such as cloth, or tea, become larger symbols in the renegotiating of not only the nation, but of individual identities.

Literary Representations of the Symbolic and Literal Marketplace

Apart from conducting a deep study into the dialectics of the economic or social transactions of the time, literature has often served as an important site for memorialising the lived experiences that embody history. This section aims to analyse moral anxieties regarding colonial commodities, and its roots in constituting a new nationalism as reproduced in *The Home and the World* by Rabindranath Tagore, and in *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* (*The Chess Players)* by Premchand.[9]

Shatranj Ke Khiladi or *The Chess Players* by Premchand is short story, satirically chronicling the Awadh society in decline, aided by the complacency of their aristocratic gentry. The title references the two aristocratic chess players, besotted with the game and unable to recognise the slow takeover of colonial modernity over pre-colonial tradition to colonial modernity. Premchand's ironic eye captures minuscule details that makes up the lives of the aristocracy, and this of course makes up the marketplace, with the "gold thread" and "cotton arabesques of fine muslin, and traders do roaring business in kohl, attar, tooth tinctures…" (Nopany 2007: 74). On a superficial level, this marketplace signifies that the aristocrat's world largely operates on excess time and aesthetic refinement. While probing deeper, we may understand the penchant for local goods, sustained through local exchange, may also signify a historical stagnancy associated with an economy that only looks inward and thus is extremely ill-equipped to confront, or to withstand the colonial marketplace, and in extension, a globalised modernity.

The Home and the World by Rabindranath Tagore, is a novel that perhaps surmises Tagore's sentiments towards the Swadeshi Movement. The novel is representative of his own intellectual distaste towards the Swadeshi Movement which he considered as an exclusionary endeavour, coloured with materialist motivations. In the novel, Bimala, an Indian woman at the turn of the century, is caught between her duty to the nation, and to her household and her husband Nikhil who signifies moderation and pacifism. The following is a pertinent exchange between Nikhil, who owns a marketplace and a woman whose views are steeped in Nationalist ideology.

"Is it right that ours should be the only market in all Bengal which allows foreign goods?… Order them to be cleared out!… Let them trade in Indian goods, then."

"Nothing would please me better. But suppose they do not?… I must refuse to tyrannise…To tyrannise for the country is to tyrannise over the country" (Tagore 1919: 212).[10]

The marketplace effectively becomes a site of contestation. Nikhil's refusal to "tyrannise for the country" is emblematic of Tagore's call to reject moral, or ideological absolutism. In the attempt to liberate the nation, one must not slip into the same fallacy of exercising surveillance, control through the policing of goods.

Marketplaces, Swadeshi and the Reconfiguration of the Hindu Identity

The earlier section highlighted the moral ambivalence an Indian colonial subject may have felt at the consumption of foreign goods. As Partha Chatterjee writes, Indian subjects were the "perpetual consumers" of a foreign modernity (Chatterjee 1993: 5). This led to the movement

that was to dominate the very markets of India, was the Swadeshi Movement. S.N Baneerjea, a propagator of nationalism, equated the ideas of *swadeshi* and *swaraj* (freedom), and thus imagined the act of consumption as a political act, within the increasing nationalist discourse (Bayly 1988: 311). In context of the colonial marketplace, Anand Coomoraswami recognises the roots of Swadeshi, by harbouring distaste of the globalised commodities found easily in a marketplace, which includes "caricatures of European dress," along with "cut glass and china dogs," while simultaneously arguing that *swadeshi* should personify a "religious or artistic ideal" (Bayly 1988: 310). Engagement with Swadeshi was valorised through attributes of "naturalness" or "purity", while also associated indigenous goods with the "good things of the unpolluted countryside" (Bayly 1988: 312).[11] Engagement with *Swadeshi* began to contribute to a remarkably Indian identity, while also introducing a subtle form of exclusion. Thus, what began as a consolidation and affirmation of an Indian identity, began articulating and asserting itself onto a Hindu symbolic framework.

Manu S. Pillai writes that the consolidation of the Hindu identity in the wake of the nationalist movement meant that India would "return in time to Hindus exclusively" (Pillai 2025: 240). It was due to this that many leaders such as Tagore, initially proactive in the Swadeshi movement, began slowly removing themselves from the growing violence associated with the movement. As Sumit Sarkar observes, the movement, while gaining immense relevance, became synonymous with the "revivalist approach to the Hindu religious tradition" with moderates that were "condemned as denationalised Anglicists" (Sarkar 2010: 48).

India was beginning to write a new history of the commodity, and since an idea cannot thrive without implicit contradictions, Swadeshi was no different.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for a reading of Indian history by tracing the economy and social ramifications of the introduction and even re-introduction of goods such as tea and the muslin cloth, while exploring the literary representations of colonial and pre-colonial marketplaces as contentious sites . Through this history, this paper has also understood the emblematic colonial marketplace as a catalyst of the modern Hindu identity, through the movement towards Swadeshi. Overall, this essay has established markets as political spaces, rather than passive backdrops. Consumer nationalism, once spurred by the colonial marketplace, emerged from a desire of sovereignty, decolonisation etc, has now permeated to the digital space, increasing accessibility to indigenous goods. But in the visual economy that dominates the marketplaces there is an increasing need to interrogate whose efforts go into crafting goods that allow consumers to retain their affiliation to the nation. It is also necessary to problematise the tendency of consumerism to dictate our choices and our identity, especially today. Thus, we return to the "illusory" marketplace that Maurya Simon conceptualises, except, today, it's a lived postcolonial and digital reality, where, as Simon writes, we all bargain for what we're worth.

Notes

[1] J.H. Parry's *The Discovery of the Sea* (1974) (Bose 2009).

[2] Bose extends K.N. Chaudhari's argument on the inclusion of the Indian Ocean as one of the major trade routes in his book *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (1985) (Bose 2009).

[3] Rajat Kanta Ray argues on the dominance of the bazaar system today despite western impositions in "*Asian Capital in the Age of European Domination: The Rise of the Bazaar, 1800–1914*," *Modern Asian Studies* 29, no. 3 (1995): 449– 554 13, (Bose 2009).

[4] Short term visitors too, as a consequence of the introduction of short-service commission after the Crimean War, had increased considerably, along with the construction of the railway (Sohoni 2023).

[5] While Austen's novels abstain from referring to political realities (with the exception of *Mansfield Park*), the motif of Mr. Tilney's knowledge of muslin are recurrent throughout the novel.

[6] Miskin further writes about the knowledge of muslin as an affirmation towards Tilney's masculinity — a masculinity tied to the national, or imperial enterprise.

[7] Rappaport writes: "Between the 1820s and 1870s, the British and their allies fought, threatened, and rewarded local leaders to secure the land and labor for tea." Tea, as commodity, was not unknown to Assam, but according to Rappaport, the British had turned it into a "sordid business" (Rappaport 2017: 86).

[8] Gandhi condemned tea advertising in 1935, and was one of the firsts to initiate a national conversation on the association of tea with British consumerism.

[9] Both were adapted by Satyajit Ray into films.

[10] Indrani Mitra, elaborates further on Tagore's personal politics and its reflections in The Home and the World. See *I Will Make Bimala One With My Country": Gender and Nationalism in Tagore's The Home and the World* (Modern Fiction Studies, 41(2), 243-264).

[11] Village songs of the 1905-10 aided in these constructions, with Charankabi Mukundadas, Rajanikanto SenBayly, being the major composers. In a song, Mukundadas urges Bengali women to throw away their silk and glass bangles (Bayly 1988).

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