

# The making of the *mokam*: Railway trading stations and mapping a business landscape in Eastern India, c. 1870-1914

Saumyashree Ghosh

(Graduate student, Department of History, Princeton University)

There is considerable realization in historiography that new wholesale marts along railway lines changed the commercial set up in nineteenth century rural India (Grover 1966; Bayly 1983). But the story of their everyday business remains largely unaddressed. Set in the latter half of the nineteenth and over to the twentieth century, this paper is concerned with these new configurations of markets. Speaking of the railway station as a new site and sector of the economy, this paper explores the interaction between commercial capital and railway capital. The congested networks of railway marts or 'mokam' referred to as 'gunge' and bazaar were located in the suburban areas or the 'mufassil'. This paper argues that a visible social nexus on the ground and a fine financial nexus forged across the stations held together the indigenous sector of the bazaar over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and adequately complicate our prevalent notion of the bazaar as *hundi*-and-*arhat* bound (Ray, 1988). The informal social nexus was one between the 'mahajan' (financier) and the Station Master which help explain the making of these marts and the business dealings therein. Present in official records as an illegal intermediary or 'dalal' to be later formalised by the colonial state as the 'freight-broker', the paper discusses how the Station Master as a significant commission-and-speculative agent safely imbricated the railroads within the fine webs of commercial capital. Based on archival records and merchant account-books, I also argue that an 'intermediate finance' with novel forms of mercantile insurance developed across the railway trading stations. In other words, if the railways produced new geographies of indigenous capital in South Asia, what does their pattern of market relations tell us about the strength of '*bazaar* capital' (Rajat Ray, 1984) which was being accumulated in these marts and would go a long way after the war to undo the monopolistic clout of European companies over certain sectors of East Indian economy?