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Making Up a Bazaar: An Ethnographic Profile of a Section of a Downtown Marketplace in India

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ABSTRACT

Academics usually consider markets as primarily economic institutions. The other varied anthropological perspectives on them are often ignored. Anthropological studies of markets analyze them as modules wherein complex social processes take place and thereby it generates multitude of cultural activity in its own dimension of economic exchange. The present study wishes to understand the setting of the 'market' or 'bazaar' where several parts are acting in sync with each other, the parts are human who occupy a specific 'space' in the setting. The objective is orientated towards capturing ethnographic snapshots of a reality marginalized, if not entirely excluded, from the mainstream conceptualization of the term *bazaar*. The present paper tries to work both with people who produce and/or make different products and sell them in this *bazaar* and with those who buy or consume such products, and compare their alternative approaches of relating to the concept and space that is *bazaar*. The idea is to understand the ways in which people do find a place for the *bazaar* in their everyday existential conundrum.

Key Words : Market, Bazaar, Ethnography, Organization

INTRODUCTION

Studies on Indian 'Bazaar':

The origin of the word '*bazaar'* is probably from the Persian word 'bāzār', which roughly means a market (in a Middle Eastern country)[1] . However, in India, these are not only meant to be networks of economic processes and transactions, but as a site embedded in community, providing framework through which economic transactions take place. Experientially, they are an assault on the senses, stimulating and overwhelming. The common understanding of a bazaar is that it is usually informally organized, shoddily planned, and built only to answer the needs of the people of surrounding area. However, closer inspection might reveal it onion like structure that would offer formidable problems to the analyst. It invariably comprises of a multitude of actions, complex social relations, interactions, and connections that are simultaneously unrestricted and isolated, prescribed and casual. For the most part, despite being such familiar and highly visible aspects of the cities where they operate, these institutions remain woefully understudied - their rich social lives undocumented and their economic import unknown. The recognised works that do exist cater mainly towards two extremes: the occasional vivid, rather personal subjective impressions found in travelogues, and the intellectual academic studies produced by experts (Seligmann, 2004). There have been pitifully small literatures that focused exclusively on Indian 'bazaar' as such. One such recent work by Anand A. Yang (Yang, 1998) focused on *bazaar* during colonial period, especially on markets of Patna. The scant literature on the topic falls under some of the following major categories: *historical overviews* (Ashby, 1938),

1. Concise Oxford English dictionary, 2004. Oxford University Press. London and New York.

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cross market surveys (Karve, 1970), *consumption patterns* (Lele, 1971; Fjeld and Sommer, 1982), public policy speculation (Ostor, 1986), etc.

The issues:

Reviewing the literature we can make out that the term 'market' or '*bazaar*' has managed to carve out a niche for itself in the sphere of the study field of Anthropology. Here, for the purpose of my study, my objective is orientated towards capturing ethnographic snapshots of a reality marginalized, if not entirely excluded, from the mainstream conceptualization of the term *bazaar*. My intention was to work both with people who manufacture and sell products in the *bazaar* and with those who consume such products, and compare their (alternative) modes of relating to the concept and space that is *bazaar*. The idea is to grasp the ways in which people do find a place for the *bazaar* in their lives. In other words, what it means to them, and how market and marketing as an aspect of contemporary life constructs its own identity in their lives.

Common People's Bazaar: The Setting:

From February 2007 until October 2007 I conducted thirty-one in-depth interviews with the people of the bazaar, ranging in length from one hour to 90 minutes. I met approximately half of my respondents through contacts with community leaders and a subsequent snowball sample. Respondents reported a diversity of jobs held either by them or their parents, who not only included vendors directly related to Bazaar economy but also mechanics, nurse aides, and doctors, managerial and clerical staffs at various government and private firms, and entrepreneurs who depend upon the Bazaar either as consumer or other. Finally, I visited different 'Samities' (i.e. certain type of union for those whose livelihood depends on such informal markets), including a campaign office for a political party, and religious institutions like temples near the *bazaar*. I also interacted with youth groups who usually hang around the *bazaar,* spending their leisure time chatting and gossiping with each other. Some of them are active members of a local club near the *bazaar*. My intention was to gather as many different perspectives of the bazaar as possible.

Gathering data through participant observation, I tried to enter and become a part of the actual context in which people pursue their activity around the bazaar, learning firsthand how they accomplish their work on a daily basis; how they understand and experience their action, spending sufficient time there to understand and learn how to conduct myself according to the norms of the setting. Observations are logged and converted into field notes on a daily basis. Interviews provided another avenue for gaining observations, and these vary in the extent to which they are structured and formalized (Holstein and Gabrium, 1997). For this research purpose, interviews have been organized through semi-structured and standard interview protocols or semiformal conversation guides; along with free flowing, informal exchanges. In many cases subjects have been interviewed multiple times to gain their stable and changing perspectives on events as they unfold. Through interviews, the researcher's intention is to collect people's accounts of their work lives, actions, experiences, perceptions, opinions, and feelings (Miller and Fox, 1997). As a matter of practice, interviews are usually tape recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Concoction and constitution :

The major portion of the *bazaar* is located at the heart of central Howrah's most populated and extremely urbanized area. The main factors taken into consideration when selecting the market site were: visibility of the *bazaar* to potential customers, sufficient space, easy accessibility and traffic flow, proximity to downtown areas (which promises high traffic of buyers with higher spending capacity, and their vast range of consumption demands), number of prospective customers, safety, use of public land, and potentiality of market growth. In terms of assigning space to a vendor in the bazaar, earlier first come first served was the prevalent method used. Nowadays, however, the Samities and the Municipal Corporation decides the place and associated extension. In order to attract customers to the market, different point-of-purchase promotions and advertisement tools are used by all businessmen. Although rivalry among vendors and between them and local retailers is not serious in general, in some cases it threatens to hinder the continuity and efficiency of these marketing venues.

Market as site :

Seeing space, feeling space:

I began my fieldwork with a walk in my hometown *Bazaar*, in Howrah, immersing myself in the feeling of being in a *bazaar*. I ventured out on my own to (re)search the whole market, to hear a babel of voices, a labyrinth

of a few hectares, a huge network of narrow, rudimentary paved alleys with hundreds of stalls, surrounded by a few buildings, some tumble-down, others brand new, such as the big structure that make up the new commercial complex. Soon I was to lose count. Then, I visited friends and relatives, announced my dissertation topic, and attempted to elicit local definitions of bazaar. The approach was to ask them about the images that comes to their mind first, spontaneously, when I utter the very word '*Bazaar'* and later more specifically '*Howrah Bazaar'*.

The reactions were rather mixed. A young man, who had a bag full of vegetables with him bought from the bazaar during our meeting, reasoned that bazaar is a cheaper version of big departmental stores and concluded:

"…the bazaar is a place of heat, dust, sweat, and cacophony-but still, this is a place where everybody who is anybody can go, whether with an intention of buying or not."

Another reckoned that bazaar:

"Arre eto sundor noi je sobai valobashbe. Tobe toke eta bujhe nite hobe. Mane er warmth, er vibrancy, asole hoi eta tui nijer modhay feel korchis nahole etake hoyto keu oto gurutto debe na."

("…lacks beauty and cannot be loved. You have to feel it. I mean the warmth, the liveliness, energy... Well, either you subconsciously realize this; otherwise you wouldn't attach much importance to this matter.")

Another acquaintance virtually burst out:

"ami tomake bolchi bazaar mane ki. Puro thogbaz-e vorti. Notun makra bujhte parlei thokabe. Er ager dinei basmati chal kinte gechhi Ghosh* rice shop theke, okhan theke amar baba nei. Jei amake notun dekheche, omni 80 takar je ki chal dilo, na gondho na kichhu. Baper vaggyi valo je tao soru chhilo. O diker sob kota dokan-i chor".

["I can tell you what a *bazaar* is! They see new greenhorn gullible customer and then do something that borders on the outrageous! Just the other day I went to Ghosh* rice shop where my father is a regular customer…but he (proprietor) deceived me. The shop owners from that part of the bazaar are all fraud."]

I was repeatedly warned not to pursue or direct my research towards the deception, double dealing and trickery of a bazaar. Thus, to avoid criticism and rejection, I decided to declare a broad interest in market and marketing as an aspect of contemporary life.

The market is run by traders of different religious groups, e.g. Hindu, Muslim, Jains, castes and ethnic groups. Moreover, it is a "polluted" place (Douglas, 1984), illustrating the "disordered" nature of the place (Bodnar, 2004). "The hotbed of business", "an absolute squalor", "the hovels", "the paradise of indifference", "poor people's supermarket", "the messy bazaar", - these were some of the expressions used to describe the market that I collected both from the literature[2] and from casual conversations.

I was not only lost in the hustle and bustle of the marketplace, but also rejected as a researcher at first. People working in this quasi-business belt often had indifferent attitudes towards me. The few friendly traders pointed out that complicity in securing a place and insecurity of retaining it (which involves a complex network of political blessings and protection by rogue elements against the payment of weekly 'compensations') "place us all in the same pot", and being seen talking with me could be risky for them. As attempts to engage vendors in longer conversations failed at first, I changed my research strategy to an unassuming one, wandering the market for hours and days in a row, and then writing down, at home, moments objectified by my anthropological gaze. These were fleeting glimpses of a hectic world, caught while I was strolling through the alleys, stopping to look at this and that, eavesdropping, and interviewing (Snow and Anderson, 1993, Hopper, 1996). I pieced together various impressions, e.g. different ways of exploring the market, buyers' bargaining, and ways of selecting the goods, retorts, exclamations of delight or disappointment, until I felt saturated in this experience.

Considering differences:

In addition to seeing and absorbing the fleeting images flashing and vanishing right in front of my naked eyes, these visits allowed me to better understand the inclusion of space in the category of utilization. My way of doing research helped me to go beyond the discourse and to register practices. In a bizarre sort of way, this place, the Howrah bazaar, seemed to stand for the absence of cutting edge of the modern world (like big retail markets), the underbelly of what is publicly acknowledged, but supporting the visible and the acknowledged. Petty traders and clients were "extracting" things out of this symbolically polluted place,

and then building respectable appearances.

The anthropological mode of knowing is relational and 'performative', that is, gained through social relationships and through living and performing our role(s) in a social world (Hastrup, 2004). The anthropologist is, almost by definition, transient, and as a result it is at least as difficult for the people we work with to establish ties with us as it is for us to do the same. Nevertheless, there were instances I felt I accomplished something, as some people believed in my sincere academic interest in their lives, my open attitude towards them, and my positioning on their side. In my hometown, it was a shopkeeper, one of the numerous poor, the main character of the informal economies (Chelcea and Mateescu, 2004). She allotted me the role of companion, and we whiled away many hours as I listened to her stories and curiosities. I watched her, morning after morning, arranging the vegetables and fruits, none that much fresh but are sold cheaper than the fresh ones in other such shops. In the big table placed in front of her rather shabby small shop, she arranged all in hope that she would attract price-conscious customers. Her aim is to attract those people who might have less money and/or more interested in saving than quality. Her philosophy and principle was simple, as I was asked: "Isn't it a crime to sell what cost you Rs. 20/kilo for Rs. 45/ kilo? Or is it a crime to sell it for Rs. 30/kilo". She didn't expect an answer from my end, for her justification of her job was the same. She said that when she started out she only had the right to occupy a portion of the footpath as much as a single piece of polythene sheet could afford. It was beside the temple. But there her business didn't flourish as expected. According to her, sweetmeat shops, flower shops selling garlands and incense sticks, and shops selling religious texts like 'Panchali' and 'Broto katha' (of 'little tradition') attracted customers there.

"Phulcopy ki ar Deb seba-e lage? Je pujoy je vog, je gosain-er sebadasi rog! Theke sikhlum…(pause)…tar pore pore-i biyer bala khan bikkiri kore ei sabji bazaar-er dike aasi. Taka onektai khose, tobu…"

[Can you propitiate God with cauliflower? You need to offer proper for each God requires different treatment to be appeased, so do the spiritual teachers…! I learned from experience… (pause)…after some time I sold my (gold) ornamental bangle from marriage and came here, at the vegetable market. It had cost me much, still (I think it was worth every penny)"].

Here the 'space', both in the ideational sphere and as an active agent acting like a catalyst - as evident in making her desperate enough to sell her bangle that she got in her marriage – creates an entity as in itself. The idea of "perfect space and location for business" constrains relational and material conditions set by external factors and plays an essential role in contextualizing agency (as in means of action, method).

Dimensions humane

'Re'constructing aspirations, 'De'constructing encapsulation:

I set about investigating sources of interfacing between the 'formal' and 'informal' mode of marketing, categories and distinctions between '*bazaar'* and 'market complex', preferences, relationships to materiality and notions of quality, the dialectics between the aspirational and the actual, and the search for the normative in selections and choices. I engaged people in conversations about their perspectives and dreams, witnessed gestures, or paid attention to combinations choices made-both by buyers and sellers, as a companion on shopping trips, as a participant in friends' gatherings, as a casual pedestrian in the market, and as a visitor to shops. In most of my conversations, I included questions about the sustenance, adaptation, and promotion of the *bazaar*. I also registered any related details and spontaneous comments I happened to come across or provoke.

Many a time 'the life with the bazaar, and the life without the bazaar' turned out to be the subject most of the participants were willing to talk about. The rationale behind was to ascertain to what extent the bazaar, or rather the interplay between the behavioral and the economic dimensions of a market carry on their symbiotic relation. One young entrepreneur told me that his biggest accomplishment in life is his photocopy-cum-telecom shop which he single handedly brought to the fore. After Higher Secondary, he married his sweetheart much to the dislike of both the families. His father refused to acknowledge his wife as member of the family. Thereupon the young boy decided to take loan from the bank as one of his friend agreed to be the guarantor. After 3 years he managed to repay the loan with interest

2. Yang, Anand A. *Bazaar India: Markets, Society, and the Colonial State in Bihar.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

and now he is a proud owner of a running shop. The thing that seemed more interesting to me was what he said thereafter. According to him, this shop not only secured his future, but it has also managed to bring back to him his self-respect, self-esteem, and dignity and honor to other people that he had lost when his father threw him out of the house. It occurred to me that the bond he shares with his shop was not only because it provides him sustenance but also the opportunity it created in (re)establishing his societal status, made his position as a member of his community more idealized.

If Umberto Eco's semiological theory in social sphere is considered here, then we can conclude that is prepared up by the people, whether working individually or by forming alliance, rationally or in allegedly chaotic fashion (Eco, 1986). Thus adequate inquiry into the core assumptions that construct the market as a concept and subsequent perception of 'reality' should not be based entirely on what people say they feel – it should also include the images (that stayed behind) and emotions of a field researcher, contextualizing the agency employed, without claiming to be unique.

There was another such encounter, this time it was a regular buyer who comes every morning in this bazaar to buy vegetables, fish, meat and other such associated items or commodities. By profession this middle aged man works in West Bengal Power Supply Corporation as an engineer. When I asked him about the importance of this bazaar as part of the community, he was quite vexed, not sure about the answer he thought I was looking for. I had to rephrase the question the other way round. If hypothetically he had to choose between going to a supermarket and Howrah Bazaar for his daily needs what he would choose and why. He reasoned that he had gone to the Great*[3] Bazaar market in Esplanade and though it was cleaner and more glamorous, he feels more comfortable in picking and choosing the best among a number of alternatives in a community bazaar. He has monthly payment system with some shops here. He maintains a 'Khata' in his name (exercise book masquerading as log book) where all transactions are recorded with date and at the start of a new month, the due of previous month is cleared. This has been going on since the last twenty years without a hitch. Even if there happens to be some delay in payment, there is no haggling because the shop owners trust him. This puts him and his family in a comfort zone. When he is not around, any of his family member can buy stuffs and does not need to carry cash. Returning back to shopping malls, he said that they (the mall owner, shop owner etc.) do not trust anyone. The buying-selling transaction has to be completed then and there, in cash. For middle class people like him, it does not work out that well. You cannot bargain there and the options are limited. He also has a problem with their monitoring system. The idea of a close-circuit television always watching his every step is all about outraging one's privacy.

"Amra vai purono diner manush, amader oto janck-jomoker khai nei…amar kesto moira ar gobindo mudi tei kaj chole jai…o sob disco light ar Moscow naach tomader jonnoy…"

[We are orthodox in nature…we don't get allured by glamour. I can live on with common Tom Dick and Harry's shop…those disco lights (here it refers to neon lights of some shops) and Moscow dance (refers to pretty young female shop assistants of big retail shops) are for you (young generation)…] [Perhaps the final phrase needs a literal translation here?].

Here I think it would be unjustified to think that a utilitarian-functional perspective prevailed in this interaction on norms. If impressions are contextualized and are taken into consideration, market behavior has human and humane dimensions that cannot be understood without a broader conceptualization of human motives and actions. The identification of bazaar as preferred mode of marketing in humane dimension of interfacing, of trust and acquaintance, embeds the idea of bazaar in the sphere of community.

In another such instance I had the opportunity to have a lengthy conversation with a Saree shop owner. It is a big shop and quite famous too. He said that the list of loyal clientele of his shop is quite lengthy. The number of customers who buy Sarees from his shop all year round is around 100 or less. But during Durga Puja the number goes up to 250-400 in a good year. These numbers denote people who come back to his shop repeatedly year after year. On being asked what he thinks to be the reason behind this phenomenon, at first he answered the usual – quality, price, exclusivity, etc. However, on being probed gently and repeatedly over time, other things also came to the fore. I asked him if any kind of rapport grew over time with his usual clientele, he said that there was nothing special except he knows some of his regular customers' names and knows all others well enough to identify ("mukh chena"). At this he winked and said, "It helps when you act as if you remembered them. Simple gestures

like "*Arre didi, onek din por! Valo achhen to…bosun. Bolun ki neben…*" (*Hello sister, long time no see. How are you? Please take a seat. Tell me how I can help.*), act wonders. People especially ladies love to be remembered. It makes them feel special. They feel that once I have known them personally, they would get the best of the bargain." I again asked him if he knows any of them on a personal level, he said it does not. Whenever he sees anyone, who looks vaguely familiar to him, anywhere other than his shop, a little smile of courtesy and "valo achhen" (How are you?) always does the trick.

The method of capturing something that is not discussed straightforwardly in the presence of the researcher, something that quickly turns from visible into invisible, is an attitude in which discretion and respect mingle with diffidence. It is all about collecting perspectives which co-exist with the mainstream representations of overlooking the latent reality. One has to grasp knowledge as it appears, in the form of "flashes". Benjamin (1999) would agree, and would encourage the researcher to imagine the intangible, the transient, the ephemeral, that which escapes formalized articulations, and to sense and follow that which is not stable, not re-articulable, but which momentarily shows itself. Unknowingly, I followed his advice.

I came across people who have complains against corrupt practices by some shop keepers, they don't stop going to bazaar at all and even advocate in favour of it. On the other hand, I also came across people who are directly related to market activities, where ownership of shop passed on from ascendants to descendants. Some of these people cannot even think of life without the bazaar. For some people it is an essential component in the constitution of Howrah. One even went as far as proclaiming the bazaar as a miniature version of Howrah:

"eta-i ek matro jaiga jekhane sob rokomer character khunje pabi. Doctor theke patient, habildar theke pocketmaar, maalkhor theke (***), sob…, bari bose research korar pokhhe eta best jaiga…valo valo kotha likhis…"

(This is the only place where you can find all kinds of people. From Doctor to his patient, from Policeman to pickpockets, drunkards to prostitutes…, this is perhaps the best site for research work to be conducted from home…you should write good things about it...)

This love-hate relationship perhaps expresses best the core assumptions that construct the market concept, the influence of socio-cultural norms in market behavior that explains societal embeddedness of market in the community. However, this aspect needs to be studied further to get a complete picture which this pilot study only manages to touch upon.

Conclusion:

This work centers on Howrah Bazaar in its own setting, at the core of an Indian township, the heart of the central business place and a downtown residential area. The overarching motif of the narrative presented here is the *bazaar* itself. The anecdotes presented here ties in with this theme because experiences and words of those individuals address this central place of the region, the Howrah Bazaar, which the author views as one adapting and adjusting with changing situation. The double edged sword that reflexivity is, without having an opinion might be seen as a case of authorship denial while having a clear cut position on the researcher's part be labeled as a case of hermeneutic narcissism. Obviously the representations Howrah *bazaar* in this article is my own, not some kind of 'objective truth', and they derive from a partial view of Howrah society (of which I am a member), however much I attempted to solicit a range of perspectives in my fieldwork. Still, with the risk of being labeled so, this student of Anthropology would like share his observations and impressions. This subjective impression can be corroborated by other personal observations in this paper.

The story of the *bazaar* can be read from its built environment. Situated almost in the middle of this city occupying three to four blocks, the underlying focus of the market seems to be shifting towards the growth of hawker/mobile market. The connectivity that it shares and creates with Howrah as urban center and the network of transaction it sustains with the neighbouring towns gives it the excuse to expand all through the cross section of *** road. But my research starts where the transaction-centric view of the *bazaar* ends.

From the very beginning my intention was to feel the 'life' of *bazaar*. The voices, noises, its alluring charm on one hand; with the repelling nature courtesy its third-world blessings in form of sickening stench, nauseating ambiance, and distasteful decoration on the other. Most of my enquiries revolved around people's notion about

3. *Name changed to respect privacy.

the space called *bazaar*, and how much it is a part of the community's social life – if at all.

It is difficult to fathom the 'embeddedness' of a bazaar in the community through case study or interview method. The image that is created analyzing the discourse, experiencing the emotions that it evokes provides a peek into the ulterior, intuitive feelings shared by the people concerned.

It is not only the mutual trust and respect that relates people. Trust and suspicion, faith and skepticism, etc. all these contradictory binaries make up the association real and practical. The identification of bazaar as preferred mode of marketing in humane dimension of interfacing, of trust and acquaintance, embeds the idea of bazaar in the sphere of community.

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