

Abstract

This thesis explores the history of electrification in colonial Calcutta, and more broadly colonial India, as a process marked by active contingencies rather than by technical and economic certainties. In tracing the contingent character of electricity adoption, the thesis firstly tries to query the constitution of the demand for electrical energy in Calcutta. Given that electric fans became the primary medium of electrification in the colonial city, the thesis tries to understand how the demand for fans could be connected to the pre-existing habit of being serviced continuously by the manually operated device known as the punkah. After this pre-history, most of the thesis deals more directly with the conditions enabling the setting up of electricity networks in the city (and elsewhere in India) by focussing upon colonial law-making and regulation since late 19th century, till about the 1930s. It shows how colonial legal codification and administration became a site of anxious differentiation in comparison to developing metropolitan norms of governing technical conduct. The thesis also describes how such administration was plagued by a fundamental complication concerning how and under what kind of authority and ‘expertise’ the technology and commerce of electricity was to be governed. In the process, the administrative regime left ample scope for the emergence of a native intermediary class of electrical agents and workers who crucially bridged the gap between the uncertainties fostered by regulation and the actualities of electrical practice. Shaping up in this manner, regulatory interventions and allowances also had bearings for the establishment of infrastructural networks, the extra-legal practices for ‘tapping’ into such networks and most significantly, for the critical question of the *safe* production and distribution of electricity. The thesis analyses the negotiations surrounding these issues as the politics marking the transfer of electrical technology to the colony.