



The Public-Ness of Colonial Bombay's Town Hall in the Nineteenth Century

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The Town Hall was a nineteenth century Bombay institution begun by the public and completed by the government to fulfill a variety of needs and uses for both these groups. Designed by the military architect Thomas Cowper, the Greek Revival Town Hall in Bombay was completed in 1833. Jürgen Habermas clarifies that the term “public building” does not indicate that the building is open to the public. The Town Hall was used for three different purposes and was public in varying degrees. It was used to house government offices and storerooms; the public was allowed the use of the central hall and Darbár-room for public purposes at the discretion of the government; and a section had been reserved for the use of the Asiatic Society of Bombay. Thus, the central hall and the Darbár room were the most public where public meetings were held. The rooms of the Asiatic Society were reserved for its members or for a specific public. However, the central area where the statues were housed was a more public area. Finally, the government offices probably allowed public access to certain areas and not others.

I argue that the Town Hall was considered by the native public to belong to the public at large. The government permitted public meetings to be held in the Town Hall, hence making it a public space. The native public's belief in their ownership of the Town Hall is exemplified in the controversy that broke out in 1871 over the placement of the statue of the late Jagannath Shankarshet (1802-1865) in the building. I argue that only “public buildings” and “public spaces” that were under the control of the state could belong in some sense to the entire public, just as it was only under colonial rule that various native communities began to see themselves as Indians.

As a contained space for public meetings where native inhabitants could communicate with the government, and a means for asserting greater local control, the Town Hall was eclipsed by other institutions, such as the Municipal Corporation in the 1870s, and new ways of rallying public opinion, such as through public festivals celebrated in a variety of spaces in the city by Bal Gangadhar Tilak in the 1890s showed that it would be the unbound spaces in the city and a new way of conducting politics, rather than contained institutional spaces such as the Town Hall that would become increasingly important in the twentieth century.

KEY WORDS: Public space, town halls, civic life, public sphere.