

Kolkata as a Logistical Hub with Special Reference to the Kolkata Port

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This is an interesting paper-proposal. It seeks to evaluate Calcutta's strategic importance as a logistical hub in the context of India's "look east" policy. Mitra and Kumar wish to arrange this study in three axes: history, infrastructure, location. Based on the figures of the 2013-14 Annual Report of the Calcutta Port Trust, the authors conclude that the Calcutta Port as well as the city in general is likely to be able to once again reap their colonial infrastructural benefits. The authors are right in identifying the stageist and historicist tendencies associated with imagining India as one of the dominant Asian players. However, it appears to me that a critique of postcolonial studies, though important, might be slightly odd in the current scope of the paper. I reserve another occasion to comment on this aspect of the paper. In this note, I wish to develop two points that I think might add to the discussion initiated by Mitra and Kumar.

First, I think that any work on the future of the look east policy in general, and Calcutta Port in particular, must ground itself on the emerging scholarship of the Bay of Bengal Studies, consider a much longer time-frame, and evaluate the changing fortune of the Calcutta Port in relation to the Bay of Bengal trade. As students of history, we know that Bay of Bengal region was once at the heart of global history which gradually lost its prominence with the decline of the British Empire. Crossings became increasingly difficult already in 1930s as the Great Depression gained momentum in the East. The Second World War engulfed the region in December, 1941, cutting the rice supply line between Burma and Calcutta (Amrit 2013). The decline in the import of rice and the export of jute resulted in the overall decline of the Calcutta Port. Historian Sunil Amrit (2013) writes: "The rise and decline of the Bay of Bengal as a region parallels the rise and collapse of British imperialism in Asia. Imperialism provided the motive force— and the brute force— for the mass migration that tied the Bay's coasts so closely together in the nineteenth century. Its disintegration could be seen as an inevitable function of empire's end: the writing was on the wall from the 1930s".

Even during the heyday of the Bay of Bengal trade the fortune of the Calcutta Port remained unpredictable. As early as in 1895 a report notes that "shipping finds accommodation elsewhere, and however inferior this accommodation is to that available at Khidirpur, the fact remains that the Khidirpore Docks are more than half empty, month in, month out'. In 1910, it was further noticed that the revenue declined from previous year, and that the income of the Port Trust fell by Rs. 9.5 lakhs. As the War started, it was observed that between August, 1914 and February, 1915 there was an average decline in the revenue of the Port trust by about 13 lakhs per month. However, there was a marked upward swing in the Trust's revenue between March and April, 1915 due to "the abnormally heavy importation of rice from Burma". In the inter-war period, there was a steady upward swing in the fortune of the Calcutta Port Trust, and the Annual Administration Report of the Trust for the year 1937-38 estimated a surplus of over Rs. 5 lakhs. According to the Trust, this was

chiefly due to the heavy importation of rice from Burma that amounted to 4 lakh tons in the year 1937.

My questions to Mitra and Kumar would be as follows: how seriously can one take the figures presented in the Trust's Annual Report for 2013-14 as a "clear indication" of the Calcutta Port's improved profile unless the figures are not plotted in a comparative temporal axis? How much is this fortune due to the look east policy? How far is the invocation of the infrastructural and strategic privilege of the Calcutta Port historically valid? I now come to the second point. In thinking about the Port infrastructure along the East Indian cost line, one needs to keep in mind that the settlements along the Bay of Bengal are much vulnerable to the whims of nature and the sea is extremely unruly. Historically, the Ports in the East developed at a distance from the sea, preferably by the side of a navigable river. Their fortunes declined with the decline of the river system that sustained them. Thus, as Mitra and Kumar tell us, the fortune of Calcutta Port depends crucially on India's relation with Bangladesh.

One may add further that the Bay of Bengal littoral is at the frontline of Asia's tryst with climate change. The densely populated coastal zone hosts half a billion people. Thus, the look east policy needs to deliberate on the sustainable future of this population besides securing India's strategic position in South and South East Asia in relation to China. If in the 18th and 19th centuries, the strategic war in this region was between various European powers, it is now between two Asian giants. What are then the changing registers of encounter that distinguish the infrastructural invention of Calcutta as a logistical hub in the late 20th and the early 21 century from the era of colonial empire? How exactly colonial coevalness, a shared history of infrastructural modernity, and Calcutta's proverbial presidency dividend are to help Calcutta to rearticulate its regional relevance?

I encountered the look east policy for the first time while working on a coordinated eviction drive of the hawkers in Calcutta in 1996-97. The drive was codenamed "Operation Sunshine". I learned that the street hawkers in Calcutta were one of the first population groups that suffered the collateral damage of the look east policy. In fact, Calcutta's home-grown ethics of neoliberal urbanism and its voyage with India's economic liberalization drive during the Rao government were intimately associated with the look east policy which invited capital investment in West Bengal from the Asia-Pacific region. The Nandigram pogrom made many such names familiar to us. To summarize, I think one should make a distinction between the urban imaginary of the colonial "port city" and that of the logistical city of the contemporary time.

What is needed, perhaps, in the most general term is the rigorous politicization of the idea of the logistical hub. We need to think how the logistical hub can be a focus of collective existence. After Timothy Mitchell we can say that its apparent durability is also the source of its speculative fragility and fungibility. How does one then think of the relationship between infrastructure and the social? I guess that Mitra and Kumar will engage with the new historiography of infrastructure in due course.

