

Abstracts

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

Iman Mitra and Mithilesh Kumar

The main thrust of India's Look East Policy has been to forge sustainable political and economic relationship with its neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia so that it can emerge as a worthy competitor of China as a regional power. After the dismantling of the Soviet Union, its one-time trusted ally in the global supermarket of political manoeuvring, the Indian government led by PV NarasimhaRao quickly realized the strategic potential of improving trade relations, political alliance and communication networks with its neighbours like Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand, not only to counteract China's rise as a global superpower but also to assuage its own internal economic crisis which became acute in the early nineteen-nineties.¹ Kolkata features quite prominently in this vision because of its location as the conjunctive urban centre that connects China, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and India's North-eastern region in terms of transport connectivity. But more importantly, being one of the largest, most populated and economically developed cities in India,² Kolkata possesses a unique advantage as regards realization of the Look East Policy. We can describe this advantage along three interlinked axes: history, infrastructure and location.

Rajiv Sikri, a former Special Secretary (Eastern Region), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, with responsibility for the Look East Policy between 2002 and 2006, states in an interview that, due to a flawed approach to Indian foreign policy which celebrated its 'Western orientation' stemming from a colonial hangover, the possible alliances with South Asian countries were overlooked, whereas all these countries share the same 'colonial experience.'³ The expression 'experience' here has a meaning beyond the 'culturalist' paradigm of postcolonial studies which, oftentimes, by championing the cause of individual consciousness offers a reductionist view of the proliferation of concentric networks of colonialism. If we look closely at the statement of Sikri, we shall find that by 'experience' he means some sort of historical coevalness that has continued to inform the geopolitics of South and Southeast Asia even after all these nations became independent. On one hand, this coevalness is produced by anthropologizing the area through various governmental and pedagogical techniques of representation including census and ethnography. On the other hand, it is also a product of endless public and private investments that consolidated infrastructural development in the colonies. For a free and unrestricted movement of capital, this region was infested with construction activities leading to building of roads, railways, bridges, and

¹ Anna Louise Strachan, HarnitKaur Kang and TuliSinha, 'India's Look East Policy: A Critical Assessment: Interview with Rajiv Sikri (Special Report, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi, 2009):

www.ipcs.org/pdf_file/issue/SR85-SEARPInterview-Sikri1.pdf; accessed on 12 February 2016.

²The Kolkata Metropolitan Area (KMA) is the third most populated metropolitan area in India after Delhi and Mumbai. According to a survey by Pricewaterhouse Coopers, by 2025, Kolkata will be ranking thirty-first among all the growing city economies in the world (Delhi and Mumbai being the other two Indian cities ahead of it) beating the erstwhile booming urban centres like Rome, Berlin and Vienna (John Hawksworth, Timothy Hoehn and AnmolTiwari, 'Which Are the Largest City Economies in the World and How Might This Change by 2015':

<https://pwc.blogs.com/files/global-city-gdp-rankings-2008-2025.pdf>; accessed on 12 February 2016).

³Rajiv Sikri in Anna Louise Strachan, HarnitKaur Kang and TuliSinha, 'India's Look East Policy, 3.

tunnels which would bring different colonies under the rubric of one consolidated infrastructural regime. Needless to say, this infrastructural view of colonialism is incomplete without highlighting the locational specificities that participated in the making of a colonized South Asia.

With this framework in mind, this research proposal attempts to situate Kolkata along the axes of history, infrastructure and location. Calcutta (it became Kolkata officially only in 2001) was the first capital of British India and the oldest riverine port in the country. Its history of urbanization is replete with narratives that explain the centrality of its geopolitical importance in the spread of colonialism. The mercantile networks that specialized in trade of indigo, tea and opium in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries soon led to forceful encroachment and toppling of independent rulers in the surrounding region. It also worked as a pivot in the infrastructural developments including improvement in communication and transport facilities, not only within the eastern parts of the country, but also extending up to the far east of the British empire. In many ways, Calcutta was the second city of the Empire, right after London, in terms of urban aesthetics and commercial enterprises like its famous jute industry on both sides of the river Ganges. The downfall of the city started to happen reportedly after the shift of capital to Delhi in 1911. The partition of Bengal in 1947 not only resulted a huge influx of people from East Pakistan, but also disconnected the supply chain of raw jute to the manufacturing units, causing shutdown of many of these factories. Suddenly it became a city of unending darkness and gruesome poverty that thrived on NGO charity and cultural capital of *bhadrolok* politics. However, it continued to function as the gateway for trade in the states in eastern and north-eastern India, Nepal and Bhutan.

In spite of its notorious (but slightly overplayed) backwardness, there is no doubt that Kolkata is in the process of revival as the most crucial nodal point under the Look East policy. Due to its locational specificity and historically accumulated infrastructural capital which was lying unrealized for long but will soon be channelized towards revamping the trade networks in South and Southeast Asia, it has a unique advantage over other eastern Indian cities. Both the Indian and Chinese governments have taken cognizance of its potential and have proposed to build two economic corridors respectively – the Amritsar-Kolkata corridor along the Gangetic valley and the Kolkata-Kunming Highway connecting China, Bangladesh, Myanmar and India. The Kolkata port is also supposed to play a big role in this scheme of things. Located on the left bank of the river Hooghly at Latitude of 22°32'53" North and Longitude of 88°18'5" East, the Kolkata Dock System is one of the oldest dock systems in the country. It is commonly described as the 'gateway to Eastern India for the rest of the world.'⁴ Its vast hinterland includes West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Assam, the North Eastern States and the two landlocked neighbouring countries, namely Nepal and Bhutan. It is needless to say that its location is instrumental to revive the trade networks in South and Southeast Asia, especially through building connections between ports in Bangladesh and Myanmar. The Government of India has also started to take notice of its geopolitical potential and, accordingly, has emphasized on its 'modernization' as a major port linking Chennai (India) with Yangon (Myanmar) and Chittagong (Bangladesh) in its latest scheme titled 'Sagarmala' to improve maritime trade.⁵ The modernization drive will focus on development of efficient coastal transport networks, promotion of port-based special economic zones (SEZ) and ancillary industries and enhancement of tourism

* Researcher, Calcutta Research Group.

⁴ <http://www.kolkataporttrust.gov.in/index1.php?layout=1&lang=1&level=2&sublinkid=658&lid=572>; accessed on 11 November 2015.

⁵ Ministry of Shipping, Government of India, 'Concept Note on Sagarmala Project: Working Paper' [<http://www.ipa.nic.in/Conceptnote.pdf>; accessed on 11 November 2015].

and aestheticization opportunities. The Union Shipping Minister NitinGadkari has recently revealed that the total investment in this project will exceed Rs. 70000 crores.⁶

There is also a need to critically explore the recurrent claims that the Kolkata Port is dying because of difficulties in pilotage and drafting. However, having a look at its annual Administrative Report of its managing authority – the Kolkata Port Trust – for the year 2013-14, one may sense an ongoing process of recuperation: currently the Kolkata Port is ranked third among all Indian major ports in terms of container traffic handling; it is ranked second in terms of growth in handling both iron ore and fertilizer and third in terms of handling the raw materials for fertilizer among all the ports in the country. Also, Kolkata is ranked first in terms of the number of vessels handled during the financial year of 2013-14 (17.1% of the total number of vessels handled in all Indian ports).⁷ Numerous Public-Private Partnership (PPP) projects are also underway including development of berth facilities at the Haldia dock (another dock system in West Bengal), betterment of transloading facilities at the Sandheads and its vicinity for midstream handling of dry bulk cargo, and development of a container terminal in Diamond Harbour. By the latest calculations, in the quarter of April-September, 2015, a massive 19.62 percent rise in cargo traffic is recorded from last year (April-September, 2014) under the Kolkata Port Trust.⁸ The Port Trust owns land parcels in and around the city where warehouses are built to store cargo so that it can be sent to other parts of the country and beyond. Kolkata as a thriving urban centre hosting a web of transport networks including railways and roads, therefore, ranks among the most potent nodal points of trade connectivity in the world.

Having set the context of the proposed study on Kolkata as a logistical hub with special emphasis to its port system, we may summarize the concern that we shall try to attend in the course of this research. The vision of Kolkata as a logistical hub rests on its locational advantage, history of infrastructural accumulation and increasing potential as a transnational nodal point in the new Silk Route. It is to be seen how this vision is actualized by negotiating with the tension between Bangladesh and India/West Bengal on questions of water sharing through the Farakka Barrage and projected 'security risks' emanating in the region. The main emphasis of this research will be on the links between realization of the infrastructural networks and built-in capital and geopolitical negotiations that may facilitate or hinder such moments of realization. We shall attempt to situate this issue along the following broader theoretical question: what are the differences and connections between the imagination and materialization of logistical visions in the shared colonial past of the region and the postcolonial Look East Policy that seemingly takes account, makes use and replicates the same vision to an extent.

⁶“Sagarmala project: Government to spend Rs 70,000 crore on 12 major ports, says NitinGadkari”, *The Economic Times*, 6 October 2015 [<http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/infrastructure/sagarmala-project-government-to-spend-rs-70000-crore-on-12-major-ports-says-nitin-gadkari/articleshow/49229434.cms>; accessed on 11 November 2015].

⁷ Kolkata Port Trust, *Administrative Report, 2013-14*, 1.

⁸ <http://www.kolkataporttrust.gov.in/showfile.php?layout=2&lang=1&level=2&sublinkid=1821&lid=1538>; accessed on 11 November 2015.