

Logistical Labour and the Airport City

Mithilesh Kumar

“Airport City”, in the great scheme of things of John Kasarda, is a futuristic mapping of how cities are going to look like or should look like. A city that is built around the airport, an aerotropolis, whose high citadel is the terminal where, instead of philosophy and the matters of the state, what is discussed is company balance sheets and acquisitions.¹ It is a nowhere place. At a more philosophical level, it also has a resonance with a new *nomos* of the earth as conceptualized by Carl Schmitt. There of course is the “firm land and the free sea” but ‘air’ has still something indefinable about it.² It is a space of invisible zones, no flying areas that are more related to the fixed land than the ephemeral air, of military spaces and civil spaces and at times of events that defy these controlled spaces and zones and use the incendiary material navigating that space to bring down structures in an unprecedented visual way that goes on to define a whole era of war, popular culture and insurrections. By virtue of its birth airports are inherently military. Hence, we are looking at airports not merely having twin objectives of military expansion and capitalist profit (like railways) but we are, in fact, making no difference between military and capital. When Marx in *Capital Volume 1* makes the observation that the factories had become “great labour barracks” which brought together “labourers and raw materials together” hitherto scattered all over in spindles and looms and that the working day was being implemented with “military uniformity, regulate[d] by stroke of the clock the times, limits, pauses of the work” one can make the point that he might as well be speaking of the ‘logistics of capital’. The problem that we have on our hand is how do we conceptualize ‘logistical labour’ not only, empirically, as those workers who are employed directly in the ‘logistical industries’ but as a contemporary condition of labour. In a major way, this is a further development of the research done under the “Transit Labour: Circuits, Regions, Borders” project. The concept of “Logistics” as defined by the project needs to be reiterated here:

“Logistical methods of organization apply to contemporary production and patterns of mobility. The global logistics industry is key to understanding emerging configurations of the social as well as their implied technologies and labour regimes. The primary task of logistics is to manage the movement of people and things in the interests of communication, transport and economic efficiencies. Central to logistics is the question and scope of governance – both of labouring subjects and the treatment of objects or things. When connected to the multiplication of borders, the informatization of

¹Kasarda, John D., and Greg Lindsay. *Aerotropolis: The Way We'll Live next*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.

²Schmitt, Carl. *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*. New York, NY: Telos, 2003.

subjectivity and the capitilization of culture, logistics holds broader implications around the governance of transnational worlds.”³

While agreeing to the formulation that the “global logistics industry” is the key we will demonstrate that the contemporary production processes ‘organize themselves logistically.’ That this organization is as much a result of the ‘laws of motion’ of contemporary capitalism as it is of the new innovations in governance where the “labouring subjects” and “objects or things” are to be ruled not discreetly or simultaneously but through each other.

Related to this question are questions such as: what is it in the nature of contemporary production processes that gives rise to ‘logistical labour’? What are the apparatuses of governmentality that are put in motion to organize and rule the labour? What are the mechanisms through which ‘logistical labour’ tries to forge its own politics of resisting and escaping the iron cage of these apparatuses? And finally, to examine if by their own movement as “living labour” the ‘logistical labour’ creates its own circuit.

Public Private Partnership: Privatization or Reorganization of Governmentality

The debates on Public Private Partnership (PPP) largely think of it as a euphemism for privatization, of selling out public resources at throw away prices and as a manifestation of the ‘neoliberal’ turn. The research will demonstrate that PPP is not merely privatization and certainly not restricted to the contractual relationship between the government and private players. Scholars have pointed out the legal slipperiness of the contract in the making of PPPs.⁴ It is easily demonstrable that this legal slipperiness is not due to any perceived or imagined ‘weakening of the state’ but the state restructuring itself in a manner which is more than the sum of its regulatory, governing and coercive functions. In fact, PPPs as a mode of governmentality operates and articulates itself in the interstices of that legal space which has to be continuously and perpetually defined. A judgement which did not become as celebrated as the “SAIL case” but nevertheless reinforces the above statement was *M/S Delhi International Airport vs. Union of India and others* the judgement of which was delivered by the Supreme Court of India on 15 September 2011. Briefly, the history of the case is as follows. 136 workers were employed by the contractor TDI International Private Limited as trolley retrievers at the domestic and international airport at Delhi in 1992. They were removed in 2003. These workers had already approached the Contract Labour Court for abolition of contract labour system and absorption as regular employees. In 2004, the Central government accepted the recommendations of the Contract Labour Court and issued notification abolishing the contract labour system. The 136 workers then filed a Writ Petition in Delhi High Court in 2006 for their absorption in service as regular employees and for implementation of the notification of 2004. The High Court dismissed the petition holding that the Airports Authority of India (AAI) is no longer in existence and there is a new entity Delhi International Authority Limited (DIAL). The question that emerged now was: who is the “appropriate government” for DIAL under the Contract Labour

³<http://transitlabour.asia/concepts/>

⁴Hodge, Graeme A., Carsten Greve, and Aanthony E. Boardman. *International Handbook on Public-private Partnerships*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2010.

(Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970 and the Industrial Disputes Act and whether the notification by the Central government was binding on DIAL. The details of the judgement will be analysed in the main research paper but it is sufficient to say here that while the process of defining “appropriate government” for DIAL was underway vis-à-vis labour laws the workers who were at the centre of bringing this question to the fore were being ‘undefined’ and squeezed out of the loop of legal and governmental mechanism altogether. The judgement delivered by the Supreme Court granted them a compensation of Rs. 5 lakh but observed that giving them back their jobs would create an “absurd situation.” The research project would demonstrate through this judgement and several other governmental mechanisms in operation at and for the Delhi airport that contemporary governmentality comprises of not producing subjects but of increasing desubjectification. This raises a fundamental question: what happens to the labouring subject in this process? In a study of Rajarhat New Town in Kolkata, a new conception of “multitude” is put forward which has nothing to do with the one associated with Negri and Hardt.⁵ Multitude as used in the former study is a ‘subject’ forged not by the process of subjectification by the apparatus of government but by an antithetical process of desubjectification through forcible land evictions, collusion of shady local politicians and government institutions (in this case West Bengal Housing and Infrastructure Development Corporation or HIDCO). The question that the research project will grapple with is: Could it be said the subjectification or production of subjects is no longer at the heart of the problem of governmentality? And if it is so, is it not correct to say that the “multitude” produced as a result of this process can only be ruled through violence, state or private, as is evident in the our cities, towns and villages or in their transformation from one into the other? Finally, what is and could be an emancipatory politics of this “multitude.”

It is through this lens that we will look at infrastructure which is different from the recent burst of studies about splintering urbanism and networked infrastructure. The research project would demonstrate that infrastructure such as the Delhi airport displaces the site of violence to the exterior and periphery of the city along with the “multitude.” It is a complex process where production sites are simultaneously fragmented and centralized through infrastructure installations bringing under its rule and sway more spaces for exploitation and production of the “multitude.” After all what connects workers in a decrepit workshop on the Delhi-Gurgaon border, dalit workers carrying solid waste travelling every day from Palwal and beyond, women cleaners from Mahipalpur, taxi drivers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, loaders, and displaced dalit agricultural labour if not the large production complex which is the Delhi airport. This is how the production process and accumulation in contemporary capitalism is rationalized. Infrastructure and logistics is what rationalize the fragmentation of the factory system. Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter observe that “the logistical city tends to locate itself on the city’s peripheries.” It can do so through these new innovations in government apparatus and the new rationalization of production processes.

⁵Dey, Ishita, Raṇabīra Samāddāra, and Suhit Sen. *Beyond Kolkata: Rajarhat and the Dystopia of Urban Imagination*.

Political Economy of 'Transit Labour'

Samita Sen conceptualizes 'transit labour' thus:

...we see this (transit labour) at the intersection of two major conceptual grids characterising the understanding of labour in the present: first, transitional forms of labour, which are inextricably related to transitions in mode of production, involving change in forms of labour arrangements, shifts in, creation or closures of labour markets, and in types and structures of labour deployment; and, second, transitory labour, which may be considered in chronological/empirical frame to denote changing and shifting patterns of employment or, in a more particularised sense, may address questions of labour mobility, both physical and structural.⁶

This is a powerful conceptual tool at our disposal. The "transitional forms of labour" can be extended to the propensity of contemporary capitalism to bring into its fold those forms of labour that have hitherto escaped its discipline. This is more than evident in the case of cleaners. This research will focus its attention on the women cleaners working in the airport. Most of these women cleaners belong to Rangpuri Pahari, a village near Vasant Kunj, and used to work as housemaids in the upper middle class homes in Vasant Kunj. With the revamp of the airport the local labour market underwent a change. There developed a network of labour contractors in the villages nearby such as Mahipalpur, Ranpuri Pahari, Nangal Dewat and Kishangarh. Most of these labour contractors using their kinship network recruited these women for cleaning jobs in the airport with an assumption that their experience as housemaids will come handy in the new workplace. This link between the nature of job and gender is an interesting one. This is not to say that men are not employed in such jobs. In fact, the ratio of men is more than those of women but there is also an added advantage of recruiting women as they are assumed to be pliant. Also, while most of the men cleaners are migrant labour from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh the women come overwhelmingly from adjacent villages. The new workplace and the discipline attached to it on one hand reinforce the gender roles but it also breaks the boundaries to a certain extent. The new dress code, the care of the self required performing the work and the round-the-clock nature of the work all makes the role of women both at the workplace and at homes to undergo important changes. They are looked at with suspicion in their community. The "transitory" nature of women labour also reflects the transition that the community is made to go through as the result of the former. These women workers would be one kind of labour that this research project will focus on.

The second research site which this project will focus on is a workshop in Kapashera at the border of Delhi and Gurgaon. This workshop makes trolleys, repair lifts and ladders for several airlines. The number of workers in this workshop is four but at one point in time it employed 12 workers. The reduced workforce was a result of dispute between the owner and the workers over wages. Colluding with the local landlords the owner dismissed half of the workers after threatening physical violence. The location itself of the workshop is interesting. It is surrounded by IT offices of Gurgaon, the airport and farmhouses. In other words, the workshop brings out beautifully the coexistence of myriad methods of production which is the characteristic of

⁶Sen, Samita, Mouleshri Vyas, Babu P. Remesh, and Byasdeb Dasgupta. *Situating Transit Labour*. Kolkata: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2012.

contemporary capitalism. It is a proper symbol for the logistical city and how this creates periphery at the heart of the global city marked by the aerotropolis. The workers employed in the workshop are of the nature described by Sen in the second part of her conceptualization of “Transit Labour.” The workers here, a welder, one on the lath machine, the foreman and the security guard doubling as a helper are all migrant labours. All of them are from Bihar and have small landholdings back in their villages. Two of them are from the same village. Most of them have been “logistical labour” in the sense that they have always worked in that industry. They have worked at the port in Vishakhapatnam, at coal mines in Jharkhand, even leather factories in Kolkata. They have made the transition from one work to another, one logistical site to another and make a seasonal transition from industrial worker to agricultural farmer and labour every year. This is a narrative of the logistics created by the migration of labour. This is also in some senses the kind of networks of work, supply chains if you will, which workers are forced to create for their survival by selling their labour power. Thus, the assertion above that “logistical labour” is now the condition of contemporary capitalism.

The challenge of the research project is to identify the politics of this diverse array of workers, discrete on the surface but bound to the same infrastructure installation. One has to remember here that the airport being a highly securitized zone the access of these workers is tightly controlled. These workers are under several modes of discipline. There is the airport itself, there is the workshop and finally the place where they dwell. The differentiation of discipline which was possible in the factory system, the differentiation between home and workplace, is no longer the case. There is a whole grid of disciplining processes which the workers have to negotiate and it is in this grid that the politics of this “multitude” has to be located.