

Who are the port workers and how do we study them?

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In a personal interview an office bearer of Calcutta Port Shramik Union told that port workers include all those workers who have any connection with the port. Thus, a worker loading tea at the wholesale market in the city and transporting it to the warehouse inside the port becomes a port worker. During the interview at the office of the union in Kidderpore a former seaman who was awaiting clearance of his dues from a shipping company arrived. After looking at the papers of the seaman the office bearer assured him that the money has been deposited with the court by the company and he could collect it through the lawyer appointed by the union. When I asked the office bearer if seamen are also part of port workers he said that they indeed were. Clearly, the union represented a wide variety, nay, almost all type of workers at the airport. Thus, it was not possible to define who was a port worker and how could that worker be differentiated from those related to shipping but not necessarily a port worker.

The question of defining a port worker is an important one as in the contemporary era when restructuring of industries and labour market is the norm. This is true, especially, when the current dispensation at the centre has ambitious plans of expanding the maritime network in India. Now, when the Sagar Mala Project is underway with ambitious goals it is necessary that we take a pause and analyze in detail as to what is a port, who are the port workers and how any restructuring of infrastructure has a profound impact on workers. The concept note of Sagar Mala Project says that its objective is to “evolve a model of port led development.” It further goes on to say that “Hitherto the ports were being developed as individual projects along with their respective linkages to the hinterland, focussing primarily on the facilities at the port and last mile connectivity. By linking the Major and Minor ports, various industrial and rural clusters and evacuation infrastructure into a single system at a larger regional level, a CER will enable seamless and efficient movement of cargo through the gateways, thereby allowing ports to enhance competitiveness and offer multiple freight options to end-users.” This will be done through various policy initiatives like building of Coastal Economic Regions (CERs) and “all round development of coastal cities” for revenue generation. Clearly, “port led development”

will restructure entire cities as well as labour. The question then is, in this scenario who could be termed as port workers? If we go by the patterns of unionization it is incumbent on the union that they organize all types of workers related to the port which in the new scheme of things could mean all kinds of workers perhaps even those who are producing for exports or are in the processing industry of imports in the coastal city in the CERs. The politics and problems of such unionization will be interesting to study. But we will stay with the 'port system' a little longer.

Kolkata Port System is comprised of Kolkata Port and Haldia Dock System. However, it should not be forgotten that Kolkata Port System is dependent on the Farakka Barrage. During the 1970s there was a huge discussion on how Farakka Barrage is important for the port system as the former was a necessity to keep the riverine port from silting once the navigable depth is increased through continuous dredging. Is it then not appropriate to consider the Farakka Barrage part of the Kolkata Port System as the very existence of the latter is dependent on it as the discussions of those times show? Also, Farakka Barrage led to constant negotiations, not always amicable, with Bangladesh on share of Ganga's water. Clearly, there emerges a network of geopolitical interests and strategies apart from the economic ones in case of Kolkata Port System. It is not in the ambit of this research to get into such considerations but we can indeed ask if the workers caught inside this network can be seen to be forming a singular workforce which then could be termed as port workers? The logic of Sagar Mala Project will dictate that Farakka Barrage indeed comes as part of a linkage infrastructurally. We will have to discern a similar linkage of the workers.

It is clear that the process of unionization, or the connectivity generated by the logic of infrastructure and policy mechanism does not solve our problem of identifying the port worker. The next step will be to see if laws could come to our rescue in defining and identifying the port worker. It must be mentioned here that maritime laws are specialization unto their own as they intersect national, international and humanitarian laws. It is, again, outside the scope of this research to get into the details of such intersections but what can be said at this point is that workers are implicated in myriad forms of ownerships which range from flags of convenience, separation of registered owners, commercial manager and crew manager etc. This system of outsourcing and ownership of a ship makes it difficult to pin down a proper authority with which labour can negotiate or make a demand. Thus, it is quite easy for the operators of cargo vessels to

abandon the ship mid-sea and leave the crew stranded as reported in the report of International Transportworkers' Federation report *Black Sea of Shame* published in 2012. It is for this reason one should exercise a high degree of caution when bringing the crew on the ship as part of port workers. It might prove to be counterproductive both in terms of unionization as well as analytically.

An attempt was made to define 'Dock Workers' legally through The Dock Workers (Regulation of Employment) Act, 1948. Dock Workers as defined by this law are as follows:

- (1) Employees covered under the schedules of the Dock Workers (Regulation of Employment) Scheme relating to the major ports of Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Cochin and Vishakapatnam.
 - (2) Employees covered by Unregistered Dock Workers (Regulation of Employment) Scheme at the ports of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras.
 - (3) Similar categories of employees as covered under Item 1 at the ports of Kandla and Mormugao.
 - (4) Similar categories of employees as covered under Item 2 at the port of Cochin, Vishakhapatnam, Kandla and Mormugao.
 - (5) Similar categories of employees as in Items 1 and 2 at all major ports whether they are covered by the Schemes or not.
- C. The employees engaged by the dock labour boards and their administrative bodies.
- D. Employees engaged by listed employers.
- E. Employees of employers, other than port authorities, dock labour boards administrative bodies, listed employers and registered employers.
- (1) Ore employees at dumps or depots.

(2) Employees engaged for handling cargoes in warehouses and transit sheds.

(3) Crew of boats, lighters and barges wholly engaged in the docks and streams whose work is connected with loading and unloading of vessels and other processes of dock and port work.

(4) Employees engaged in loading and unloading all cargoes (including tea chests) in the dock areas from river crafts, vessels boats, trucks, etc. (5) Persons mainly employed in a Dock as defined in para 2(3) of the Dock Workers (Safety, Health and Welfare) Scheme, 1961 made by the Central Government in exercise of powers conferred by Section 4(1) of Dock Workers (Regulation of Employment) Act, 1948.

It can be seen that Dock Workers include a variety of workers making it a site for different kinds of production of goods and services. Also, who is a Dock Worker might also depend on the port in which the worker is employed. Yet, work is structured in such a way that cooperation among all kinds of workers need not be the case. The same office bearer of the union informed that, for example, workers of stevedore companies have no way of interacting with workers in the container yard. This homogenization of different workers could have a historical reason. As pointed by G. Balachandran in *Globalizing Labour?: Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c 1870- 1945* for up until almost the first quarter of the twentieth century “maritime labour market was largely indistinguishable from the wider casual labour market at Indian ports.” Also, as comprehensive the inclusion principles of “Dock Workers” are in the act there are several workers which did slip through the net. This was evident in the case of *Calcutta Port Shramik Union vs. Calcutta River Transport Association* which was decided by the Supreme Court of India in 1988. The case pertained to 15, 000 bargemen (majhis and dandeers) who were denied reasonable wages and allowances for 12 years. The Supreme Court made the point that the inclusion principle in the case of “Dock Workers” was based on handling cargoes. The judgment delivered by the Supreme Court cleared the way for a wider inclusion of workers in the legal realm of “Dock Workers”. Clearly then, who or what constitutes port work and workers is not a permanent feature, legally, economically or politically. Also, it must be mentioned here that as part of the restructuring of the Kolkata Port System Calcutta Dock Labour Board (CDLB) ceased

to exist in 2006 and was merged with Kolkata Port Trust. It was, in a way, closure of the 'old' kind of workers and emergence of the new which now has to be studied. It is for this reason we are faced with the problem of defining in the current situation: who is a port worker as much as what is a port? We can then ask a question keeping in mind the above arguments if it is fruitful even to see port as a homogeneous entity or even an integrated work place. Or to turn the question, is port a fragmented space for workers and an integrated one for policy designers?

A Short Overview of Workers' Struggle at Kolkata Port

The port shramik union's office bearer informed that workers of Kolkata Port have not gone on strike since the 1990s. When asked what could be the reason for such a lack of industrial action on part of the workers or a truce between workers and the authorities he said that one of the reasons was better coordination with the management and other was almost a complete stoppage of new recruitments. Instead, more workers are under the contract system especially in handling containers as multinationals like the Singapore based PSA International have entered the market. Although, these workers are eligible to become members of the union as of now there does not seem to be any evidence of collective action by or on behalf of these workers. We will come to this new form of labour practice and regime but before that we need to look at some aspects of work and struggle in the past to get a sense of how work and politics have changed in the geographical as well as work space that is the airport.

One of the problems of Kolkata Port identified in the late '70s by several observers was that of productivity and it was directly correlated with that of labour militancy. A study pointed out how the restructuring of the port workers was underway since the beginning of the decade. This was done mainly through the practice of "double booking." The study showed that the workforce of 19,000 was systematically reduced through voluntary retirement and illegal retrenchment. What replaced it was the practice of booking workers for double shift. Quite clearly, this was beneficial for stevedores as it had to pay wages without overtime and pocketed one levy. This had an adverse effect on workers health and led to accidents. The same study pointed out that the 'gang of nine workers' method was to be blamed for a considerable low productivity as working in "pairing" meant that one worker remained idle. The workers' demand at that time was to make

the gang comprise of ten workers. We see here a definite method of production at play at the Kolkata Port. The period in which this study was done saw some of the most militant strikes in the major ports of India. These strikes were on demands of wage parity with other workers from BHEL, allowances, and working conditions. That time it was the labour board through which the negotiation between the state and the workers took place. Now, when we are conducting the research the labour board does not exist, technology has changed and so has the labour market. This requires a new approach to study workers at the airport.

The Kolkata Port System has led to a specialization of cargo handling between Kolkata and Haldia. Data relating to cargo handling suggests that Kolkata has emerged as specializing in container handling. This should mean that different kind of labour processes are at work at different ports and different kinds of technological arrangements. This is an important distinction while studying port workers to differentiate them in terms of work. Also, as evidenced in the visit to Piraeus labour regimes function on the basis of what kind of work is performed at the port. A container port like that of Piraeus where software controls the movement of containers and workers as well as their placement and intensity of work the very regime of software is depended on what kind of cargo is handled. This apart from the fact that different ports or different parts of the same port might be using different software, thus, producing a plethora of labour regimes. But what is evident from this is that the labour regime based on software will always try to produce standardization. This will be standardization of port, of cargo and most importantly work and workers. I think the differences within the Kolkata Port System should be studied in this light. Whether the new restructuring of the ports (through or without software) is producing standardization? How do the workers implicated in this process challenge and break this standardization?

The workers who will be studied for the research are those working in the container yard of Kidderpore, Kolkata. The emphasis will be on studying in close detail the nature of work performed. Since it is a circumscribed space it will also contain the study to a definite area. Also, since the container comes to the yard from the port in trucks it will be interesting to investigate how the workers and work at the container yard related to the workers and the work at the docks. This will help in discerning the possibility of economic and political cooperation at the Kolkata port. The composition of the workforce, hierarchy and associational processes will be studied as

well. This is the approach of the current research in studying the new forms of work and labour in the time when ports are now becoming increasingly part of geopolitical and economic calculation of the state.

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