

Minutes of the Workshop on Port Logistics Held on 20 April 2015

Participants: Subir Bhaumik

Samata Biswas

Madhura Chakraborty

Atig Ghosh

Samaresh Gucchait

Mithilesh Kumar

Iman Mitra

Brett Neilson

Ned Rossiter

Ranabir Samaddar

Bikram Sarkar

Atin K Sen

Kaustubh Moni Sengupta

Sucharita Sengupta

The first workshop of the India Leg of the Transit Labour Project-2 was held on 20 April 2015 at CRG office. The speakers included Prof. Brett Neilson, Institute for Culture and Society, University of Western Sydney, Prof. Ned Rossiter, Institute for Culture and Society, University of Western Sydney, Bikram Sarkar, Former Member of Parliament and Atin K Sen of Pennon Shipping Pvt. Ltd., Atig Gosh, Assistant Professor, Visva Bharati University and Samata Biswas, Assistant Professor, Haldia Government College.

This workshop was preceded by a consultation meeting that was held on 1 April 2015. The questions that were discussed in the workshop were a result of the deliberations in the consultation meeting. The purpose of the study as mentioned in the consultative meeting was to investigate the shifts in logistical infrastructure of the Calcutta port in the context of development of new trade routes and implementation of the Look East policy of the Indian government. The specifics of development of a port system in Calcutta and uniqueness of its strategic location (intertwined with the port system at Haldia) will also come under scrutiny. Apart from that, the town of Siliguri, a nerve centre of military logistics, located in the northern part of West Bengal and connecting trade routes with several neighbouring states and countries will also appear in this study in the context of logistical development and generation of various forms of informality and illegality. Also, the study will investigate the strategic position of the port of Calcutta, to look into the vision of forming of a port system taking into consideration both Calcutta and Haldia. It was these and some other questions that came up during the workshop which were deliberated at length.

The workshop began with the presentation of Prof. Brett Neilson. He began by saying that logistics is a way to study economy and politics. Although logistics is commonly perceived as transport the challenge is to see logistical operations in other parts of economy. It is here that logistics could be used to put finance under serious theoretical questioning. It is possible, through logistics, to think about finance capital as extraction. Therefore, it would throw up interesting results to see the logistical aspects of contemporary finance. Neilson made the point that trading is not only influenced but actually defined through the proximity to the server.

Neilson then went on to speak on the significance of Kolkata port as a site of investigation. He said that Kolkata acts as a “choke point” point in the expansion of the Chinese logistical system. It is this aspect of the Kolkata airport that in many ways define the very nature of the New Silk Road of the Chinese.

Neilson then went on to explain the approach and method that was at the heart of this research project. He first began by explicating about the approach of “follow the money” and said that this was not the approach of the project. Then he said that another approach that was quite popular was that of looking for the commodity chain where the emphasis is on to follow the goods. The project did not choose one specific good as a point of entrance to the research.

Instead, he said that the project is interested in looking for analytical angle that infrastructure can provide. Hence, the approach of the project was more in the nature of follow the software. As a conclusion he said that barriers to smooth logistical system are cultural and social. In fact, a different understanding of logistical systems is crucial to the functioning of the chain instead of being a barrier.

The next speaker was Prof. Ned Rossiter. He began with telling about the crisis among software developer SAP due to the rise of small software developers especially in South East Asia. This is a moment where the complexity of supply chain is realized. One of the objectives of the research project is to study the difference between informal and formal sector of software. Giving the example of Piraeus Rossiter pointed out the complexity of port operations resulting from the use of different software used by Chinese owned COSCO and the public port authorities. This results in different layouts and complexity in exchanges. This leads to the crucial moment for investigation. One has to follow the moment where protocol no longer works in software thus creating logistical breakdown.

Bikram Sarkar made the point that Ports belong to the services sector. He then proceeded to give the history of Kolkata port. He also brought out the difference between river port and sea port. In fact, in both the presentations of Bikram Sarkar and Atin Sen this was brought out emphatically. In the presentation of Sen brought out the advantages of Kolkata port. He gave figures to show that instead of declining the port has actually increased its capacity in throughput. He also mentioned the bottlenecks in the port operations which included a huge crane in the state of disrepair, dredging that have been long overdue etc.

There were presentations on Siliguri and Haldia by Atig Ghosh and Samata Biswas respectively. Atig Ghosh in his presentation mentioned the curious condition in which Siliguri became a place of immense geostrategic importance and hence militarized too. He said that the formation of East Pakistan created a geographical barrier in the northeastern part of India. The narrow Chicken's Neck— formally known as the Siliguri Corridor, which at one point is less than 14 miles (23 km) wide— remained as the bridge between the northeastern part of India and the rest of the country. Siliguri thus found itself pitchforked to the position of immense geostrategic importance. He also made the point that the rapid development of Siliguri could not be understood by discounting the militarization and its proximity to international borders and its absolute strategic importance.

Finally, he made the point that the sanitizing story of neoliberal development of Siliguri hits a roadblock precisely because of the same reasons. The proximity to borders, militarization and clandestine circulation of commodities ensure that it has also emerged as a hub of smuggled goods and trafficked bodies.

Samata Biswas gave a brief history of emergence of Haldia port and its development with Kolkata port as a port system. Biswas also underlined the developing infrastructure hub around Haldia as was evident in the revamping of railway tracks. She also mentioned that a close study of Haldia port will reveal a very different narrative of its alleged decline which is normally attributed to labour unrest. She finally closed her presentation by mentioning that she was interested in studying the ways that Haldia has been rapidly industrializing and developing simultaneously creating “accumulation of aspirations” on the one hand and increasing class divide on the other.

The floor was opened to discussion after individual presentations. Ranabir Samaddar cautioned that any study of ports, logistics and geopolitics in a postcolonial condition would throw unexpected results and one has to be quite prepared to it. He gave the example of the study of Rajarhat. Mithilesh Kumar made the point that it is necessary to understand the labour composition at the port and the patterns of migration in order to better understand the question of political mobilization and structure at the ports. Iman Mitra made the observation that the practice of insurance needs to be studied in conjunction with labour and see how economic calculations bear upon them. Bikram Sarkar made the point that work in port belongs to the hazardous category and accidents can never be completely removed and this might include deaths.

The workshop ended with a plan for further meeting where research agendas were to be set individually by the researchers.