Spatialization of Calculability, Financialization of Space: a Study of the Kolkata Port

[Abstract for a the Project 'Infrastructure, Software and Labour']

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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 county. It is commonly described as the 'gateway to Eastern India for the rest of the world.'[1] 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. Currently it has two approaches from the Bay of Bengal: (1) the Eastern Channel (Latitude 21°54.6' North and Longitude 88°11'30 East) and (2) the Western Channel (Latitude 21°05'00.2" North and Longitude 87°50'24.8" East). Navigation to and from the port, at this moment, is only being done through the Eastern Channel, which is one of the longest navigational channels in the world. The Pilotage distance to Kolkata is 223 km, of which 148 km is river pilotage and 75 km is sea pilotage.[2] There are several navigation aids provided by the Kolkata Port Trust (KPT) – the port management authority in Kolkata – for safe passage of the vessels: two lighthouses on the Sagar Island and Dariapur on the right bank of Hooghly; five unmanned light vessels on the sea; automatic tide gauges maintained at Garden Reach, Diamond Harbour and Haldia for round-the-clock recording of tidal data; manual tide gauges maintained at Akra, Moynapur, Hooghly Point, Balari, Gangra and Sagar; 500 river marks, 90 lighted buoys, and 42 unit buoys; wireless VHF network for communication between approaching vessels and in-shore and off-shore KPT establishments and vessels; the electronic position fixing system 'Syledis;' and the satellite-based Differential Global Positioning System (DGPS).

As one can see, even a short description of this site evokes an entangled framework of infrastructure, software and labour. In my proposal, I seek to understand this framework from two specific yet interconnected perspectives of spatialization of calculability and financialization of space. To proceed with my analysis, I have chosen the Kolkata (erstwhile Calcutta) Port as a site where these two perspectives collide and communicate with each other and give birth to a particular form of logistical governance. This form of governance requires negotiations with and navigations through a network of institutional apparatuses which produce the material basis of calculations and speculations that envisage the connections among infrastructure, software and labour.

Kolkata Port Trust (KPT) is one such institutional apparatus, which is charge of management of the Kolkata Port since 1870. Founded by the colonial rulers of India, it was bestowed with the responsibility of expansion and management of the Calcutta Port at Kidderpore. At the turn of the

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

[2] Pilotage is the act of assisting the master of a ship in navigation when entering or leaving a port or in confined water.

nineteenth century, the port in Kolkata saw a spurt in its traffic and augmentation of facilities. The export of coal, for example, rose to 8,77,895 tons in 1898-99 from a mere 4,282 tons in 1893-94. Similarly, the export of food grains also shot up to over two lakh tons in the same period from only 400 tons five years before. In 1914, at the onset of the First World War, the Kidderpore dock had 17 general cargo berths and 10 coal berths, indicating coal as the primary object of cargo movement. Another important export item from Calcutta was tea, for which separate transit sheds and warehouses were installed on the side of the river.[3] On the other hand, the chief import item was kerosene oil in the second half of the nineteenth century. There was a period of slack in cargo traffic after the Second World War and it continued till 1951. Some recovery was made during the Second Five Year Plan (1956-61) because of the government's decision to import iron, steel and project cargoes. The dock facilities also expanded with purchase and replacement of cargo handling equipments, cranes, railway tracks, diesel locomotives, etc.[4] Under the same plan, one hundred and thirteen gangs of secondary cargo and coal dock labourers, including fifteen hundred temporary workers, were made permanent employees of the Port.[5]

It seems that there were special provisions for all the ports in the country in different Five Year Plans of the Indian Government. After the depreciation of the port facilities during the Second World War, the First Five Year Plan (1951-56) put emphasis on acquisition of 'new vessels like dredger, survey vessel, dock tug, anchor vessel, light vessel and launch.'[6] The Second Plan, as we have noticed earlier, also continued with this scheme of reorganizing the facilities along with introducing formalization of port labour. The most important intervention in the Third Plan (1961-66) was initiating the project of another dock at Haldia to assuage the pressure on the Calcutta Port. Another important decision was taken during this time, which was to construct a barrage in the upstream of the river Hooghly under the name of the Farakka Project for increasing the headwater supply of the river to facilitate drafting of large vessels. This decision, as many of us know, would create a lot of controversy and geopolitical tension between India and Bangladesh. The later Plans had major provisions construction of the Haldia dock and replacement of old technologies by new ones by developing container park, installing computerized systems, modernization of railway tracks, etc.

If we have a closer look, we shall see that these provisions are results of endless calculations and speculations about the geopolitical exclusivity of the port. Because it is a riverine port, Kolkata has a narrow and tortuous approach encumbered with numerous sand bars across the river Ganges. Thus the port has the longest pilotage distance where the vessels have to shirk the sand bars and make intricate calculations about the height of tides for easy drafting. Any detailed study of the movements of the ships will reveal enactment of a complex interface between human skills and non-human predicaments. But what is crucial here is to understand that these non-human elements are not some fixed components in a deterministic matrix of logistical paraphernalia. They also move,

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[3] Animesh Ray, *Maritime India: Ports and Ships* (Delhi: Pearl Publishers, 1993), 157-58.
[4] *Ibid*, 160.
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] *Ibid*, 161.

shift identities and participate in international conflicts like the one between India and Bangladesh over releasing of water from the river Padma through the Farakka Barrage to help the Kolkata-bound vessels draft comfortably.

It is often said that the Kolkata Port is dying because of difficulties in pilotage and drafting. However, having a look at its annual Administrative Report 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, 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]

One reason of this upsurge is the increasing geo-spatial importance of the Kolkata Port in South East Asia. With the realization of the New Silk Route in near future, the port in Kolkata becomes a strategic nodal point in an international trade network along with ports in the neighbouring countries like Myanmar and Bangladesh. 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.[9] 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 and aestheticization opportunities. The Union Shipping Minister Nitin Gadkari has recently revealed that the total investment in this project will exceed Rs. 70000 crores.[10]

One of the crucial features of the Sagarmala project is its insistence on utilizing the space in and around the docks by creating investment opportunities in land under the ownership of the port authorities like Kolkata Port Trust. KPT, being the largest owner of land in the city of Kolkata,[11] thus emerges as a hotbed of land speculation, rent extraction and financialization of space. Right

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[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.

[9] 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].

[10] 'Sagarmala project: Government to spend Rs 70,000 crore on 12 major ports, says Nitin Gadkari', *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].

[11] Ray, *Maritime India: Ports and Ships*, 206.

now, the port authority owns different sizes of parcels of land scattered all over the city. Most of these plots are leased out for various residential and commercial purposes. It also extracts rent from the numerous warehouses it owns in Kolkata: the Strand warehouses, the Armenian Ghat Warehouse, the Canning Warehouse, the Clive Warehouse, etc. The rent income of the KPT is yet to become a major source of revenue for the port, but the annual Administrative Report (2013-14) shows a small increase in rent and premium on leased land (2.41 crores) from the previous year. However, as newspaper reports show, KPT has become quite alert to the potential of remodelling these land parcels into more economically viable spaces of rent extraction and is trying to recalibrate the older rates and schedules. It is quite clearly evidenced in a recent squabble between KPT and a film production company which was still running its business at an 80,400 square feet plot in the Hyde Road Extension after the expiry of the lease and port authority's denial of renewing it.[12]

The objective of the paper is to underscore the linkages between calculations governed by spatial considerations and speculations insisting on space making exercises so that the material foundations of infrastructure, software and labour come to the surface. What is even more interesting in this context is the fact that KPT is still a public sector enterprise with thousands of permanent staff and millions of dollars in built-in assets – a typical case in many Asian countries. The connections between various forms of calculation about the details of pilotage and drafting, revenue and expenditure of the port system, valuation and depreciation of human and non-human assets, risk assessment and insurance technologies, etc., and modalities of financialization of space by reforms in rent structure and revaluation of land holdings with a strong emphasis on investments in creating special 'economic' and 'aesthetic' zones as part of the urbanization drives in neoliberal capitalism cannot be addressed if we do not consider the governmental apparatuses that are in operation here. I wish to do so by studying the different regimes of calculability within the context of the Kolkata Port Trust's institutional networks as sites of logistical governance. By exploring minutely the processes of making calculations as evinced in the expert narratives of cargo traffic and the futuristic development agendas that seek to exploit the port's geopolitical exclusivity, I plan to inquire about this notion of 'governance' which has manifold implications in present time. Expanding on the Foucauldian notion of 'governmentality,' I am inclined to argue that the agential boundary of a governmental state is not limited to the procedural task of dispersal of resources under the discursive tutelage of political economy, but also to accommodate various uncertainties keeping in mind the particular spatial ontologies of these modalities of dispersal.

[12] http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Venkatesh-Films-to-vacate-port-land-by-Nov-16-Calcutta-HC/articleshow/49398573.cms, accessed on 11 November 2015.