

Warehouse and Transport Facilities in the Port of Calcutta, 1870-1950

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This paper looks at the development of the port facilities in Calcutta from the third quarter of the nineteenth century. It specifically looks at the way goods were brought to the port, stored there, and then shipped or transported to other areas. Industrial growth in India and massive increase in import/export trade necessitated rapid development of port facilities in Calcutta. The Calcutta Port Trust was officially established in 1870. It made rapid advances in building additional jetties, streamlining dock logistics and cargo handling. In this paper I will focus on two important aspects of this enterprise. First, I will study the role of warehouses in facilitating the trading activities of the port, and secondly, I will analyze the crucial part played by the transport system in aiding the movement of goods to/from the port area.

Warehouse:

By the mid-nineteenth century, due to the massive increase in trade, more storage space was required in the port area of Calcutta. Between 1850s and 1880s, trade in jute, cotton and tea multiplied enormously. Calcutta was the main centre for imports of cotton piece goods. And from here they were distributed throughout the hinterland that comprised provinces of Assam, Bengal, parts of northern India and central India.¹ In the 1870s, export trade of tea increased in leaps and bounds. The Port Commissioners decided to build a tea warehouse on Strand bank to accommodate this increased volume of trade. However, initially the Bengal Chamber of Commerce criticized the step as it believed that the taking up of land on the Strand would interfere with private enterprises. Even during the turmoil regarding the location of the warehouse, the Commissioners went ahead with other relevant issues associated with building of the warehouse. In 1876 they asked all the mercantile firms who were involved in tea trade to get back to the Commissioners about designs for a suitable building. Twenty-two firms responded

¹ Arun Bandyopadhyay, 'Realms of Imperialism', in *Port of Calcutta: 125 Years, 1870-1995*, Commemorative volume, Calcutta Port Trust, p. 20.

positively to the entire scheme. A Sub-Committee was formed to look after the construction of the warehouse. The sub-committee met thrice to discuss the building-plans, the mode of working and the scale of charges. A circular was issued with the proposed scale of charges, and the Commissioners asked the firms that if those charges were levied in the warehouse whether the firms would be interested in the trade. The tea-brokers were adverse to the entire scheme from the outset, but the firms were more or less favourable to the project.² After various contestation and negotiation, the tea warehouse at the Armenian Ghat was ultimately made available from 1887.

Apart from this tea warehouse, other warehouses were soon proposed. In February 1882, the first block of warehouses at No. 1 jetty was commenced. Another block was sanctioned by the government in 1882 at No. 3 jetty which was entrusted to Messrs. S C Mitter and Company.³ But before giving the go-ahead, the government had its doubts. The British Indian Association and the Municipality feared that the new warehouses would deteriorate the value of private property in the city which was used as resting shed for goods. The proposed project of the Commissioners seemed to give the impression that the new warehouses were being built for the purpose of renting them to the merchants and traders, opined the Lt-Governor. The Commissioners replied “that the new warehouses were intended to supplement and relieve the existing jetty sheds, and that there was no intention to rent them out for business unconnected with the landing or shipment of goods through the jetties.”⁴ In the opinion of the Commissioners, regular importers or exporters would find it convenient “to rent a certain space in the new warehouses for the storage of their goods pending dispatch or shipment instead of keeping them in the ordinary jetty sheds where examination and assortment of the goods was rendered difficult in consequence of the goods of different firms being mixed together.”⁵ The Commissioners contended that this use of warehouses “was a legitimate one and was in accordance with the practice in all large ports.”⁶ The Municipal Commissioners of the town raised an objection regarding building an elevated structure on the Strand Bank, following the instruction given by the Governor of Bengal in 1852 when this piece of land was acquired by the government for

² Commissioners Report 1877, p. 31.

³ Commissioners Report, 1882-83, p. 3.

⁴ Report 1882-83, p. 22.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

public utility. The Lt-Governor thought that the warehouse was a necessary structure for the advancement of trade and was not antithetical to the use of that piece of land for the good of the general public. These objections and negotiations reveal the difficulties associated with the initial phase of construction of warehouses in the port of Calcutta. Issues regarding private property, proper use of land, trade charges, backing from the mercantile firms and the views of the Port Commissioners about modern port facilities jostled with each other to establish the warehouses.

In subsequent years, the trading activities at the port went on increasing, especially during WWI and its aftermath. The need for warehouse space was acutely felt in these years. More jetties and warehouses were ordered, and the port commissioners continuously put pressure on the government for adequate funds. In 1895, the average daily imported goods weighed around 1000 tons of which 300 tons were stored at the warehouses, the rest being carted away to other parts. In times of pressure, this amount doubled.⁷ In fact, a decade later, in 1906, the Secretary of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce mentioned that due to the increase of trade there was hardly any space at the jetties for the imported goods. He noted that new jetties and modern crane system were being constructed at the port but those were not enough; new warehouses were needed. At that time, a new tea warehouse was coming up in Garden Reach which would help in opening up almost 15,000 square feet of space at the jetties for import trade. He wanted the port authorities to construct a new warehouse for import trade on Strand Road frontage.⁸ The shortage of space in tea warehouse was a recurrent feature in the first half of the twentieth century.⁹ After independence, the new government also faced this problem. An Ad-Hoc Committee was established in 1950 to look into the matter of tea trade. It noted that the Port Commissioners of Calcutta was constructing a four-storeyed permanent tea warehouse with floor-space of 140,000 square feet and a tea transit shed covering 20,000 sq feet between the present tea transit sheds no 1 and 2, and the sales tea warehouse.¹⁰ I want to delve into the way the question of storage space and volume of trade shaped the port complex in Calcutta over the years. Exigencies of trade, global warfare, domestic demand and pressure from mercantile firms combined to mould the space of the port of Calcutta. I will study the various economic and political factors that directly impacted the construction of warehouses in the port area.

⁷ *TOI*, 4 Jun, 1895.

⁸ *TOI*, Feb 8, 1906.

⁹ *TOI*, Oct 25, 1939.

¹⁰ *TOI*, Apr 8, 1950.

Another interesting issue is the operation inside the warehouses. A major concern in this regard was the proper measurement of weight of the goods. Often disputes arose regarding the method of weighing. For instance, in 1901, the Indian Tea Association send a letter to the Commissioners of the port urging them to broach the fact to the government that the English Customs Department should accept the weight of the tea ascertained by the Calcutta port authorities in their warehouses. The Port Commission agreed to this proposal and urged the government to look into the matter. They gave a detail description of the process of weighing, arguing that there was very little chance of any error and no loss can possibly accrue to the English revenues if they accept the weight as measured in Calcutta. The process described was as follows:

The tea having being bulked in the patent machine which the Commissioners have erected, passes by gravity into the weigh hopper. From this hopper the required contents of each chest is weighed and discharged by gravity into the chest, the tare of which has been ascertained by separate weightment. The loose tea is then compressed into the chest by hydraulic power and the chest is closed and the gross weight taken, which is checked by the already ascertained tare and the weight of the tea put on to the chest.¹¹

The concern with weight and measures was persistent. In 1950, the 'Ad Hoc Committee' formed to look into the problems of tea trade noted that in the tea warehouse, only 10 per cent of the product, randomly chosen, was inspected. This did not ensure the quality of the tea or the security of the packaging. They suggested 100 per cent inspection. For this, additional warehouse space was needed as that would help in inspection as well as packaging and handling of tea chests.¹² In this paper I want to see the various ways in which the actual operation went on within the warehouse—what were the changes brought in to make the process acceptable to all, what new procedures were followed, what role did the mercantile firms, the tea and jute associations play, how did the port authorities and the government respond.

¹¹ Finance and Commerce Deptt, Statistics and Commerce Branch, Progs, May 1901, Nos. 240-241, NAI, New Delhi.

¹² TOI, 8 Apr, 1950.

Lastly, I want to briefly note the issues of safety and security measures undertaken in the warehouses. Often fire would destroy large quantity of goods.¹³ Also, erosion in the river bank created cracks in the stone foundation as well as the wall of jute and tea warehouse.¹⁴ I will look at the various ways warehouse space was made more secure over the years, and what role did insurance played in protecting the firms from possible damage of goods.

Transport:

The Port Trust initiated large-scale infrastructural development in the 1870s. One of the major areas of interest was to create proper channel of transport facilities to move goods to and from the dock area. The railways played a crucial role in connecting Calcutta with other parts of the province and country. Calcutta was served by the East India Railway, the Bengal-Nagpur Railways, and the Eastern Bengal Railways. The development of the railways was crucial in facilitating the activities of the port. Major items like rice, coal and jute were transported to other parts of the subcontinent from the port via the railways. But in the immediate vicinity of the port proper roads and carriers were not suitable to handle large bulk of cargo. For this, the Port Trust started constructing the Strand Road and the Bank as well as a tramway. The tramway work progressed rapidly with materials being imported from England. In their report of 1877, for instance, the Port Commissioners mentioned that the Trust had been able to obtain burning ghat site and section no. 17 of the new road between Ahiritolla and Ruth Ghats which enabled them to complete the work as far as the Armenian Ghat. The trains ran daily bringing the cargo from the Eastern Railway to the godowns on the inland vessels wharves. In this paper, I want to look in detail the development of the tramway around the port area as it will help us understand the way the port complex developed. Also, the development of the tramways was directly linked to the massive increase in the net cargo handling in the port. The successive stages of the tramway construction gives us an idea of the gradual extension of the port activities and the way crucial links were established between the docks and the city, and in turn with the hinterland. Various plans were proposed, some were followed while negotiations on ground forced changes and alterations. For instance, the Commissioners noted in 1877 that “the traffic passes over the

¹³ TOI, Dec 20, 1907; Oct 21, 1931.

¹⁴ TOI, Mar 2, 1955.

municipal line of railway from Sealdah to Bagh Bazar; but this is only a temporary arrangement, the Commissioners having...undertaken to construct a bridge across the entrance to the Chitpore Canal, and so carry their line of tramway direct into the Eastern Bengal Railway goods terminus at Chitpore.”¹⁵ To use the municipal line the port authorities had to enter into an agreement with the Town Commissioners. The terms of the agreement included the following:

1. That the Port Commissioners shall pay eight annas per wagon for every wagon that passes over the municipal line, either way, full or empty;
2. That the Port Commissioners shall have free use of the line for six hours daily, from 7 to 10 am in the morning and 3 to 6 pm in the afternoon;
3. That the Port Commissioners shall pay the cost of keeping that portion of the municipal line over which the trains run in repair;
4. That either the Town or Port Commissioners shall have the option of terminating the arrangement by giving one month’s notice at the end of each year after the second year.
5. That this arrangement shall be binding on both parties for two years certain.¹⁶

With this arrangement with the railways and the town authorities, the port tramway was inaugurated on 22 November, 1876. But crucial works were still left to be done. Originally, the intention of the Trust was to carry the tramway line across the mouth of the Chitpore canal by building a moveable bridge. However, objections were raised against such a bridge as it was feared that it would interfere with the traffic on the canal, and the “Government required that any bridge to be constructed in this position should have a clear headway of 16 feet above high water. To obtain the necessary incline for the approaches to such a bride, an embankment would have to be made at the frontage of the Eastern Bengal Railway Company, which would shut out the Company from access to the river, and to this the Company would not have agreed.”¹⁷ Also, an elevated line would cost around Rs. 4.5 lakhs which was not possible to recover from the goods traffic on that line. The Commissioners decided to abandon that route as they thought that a fixed bridge was the only solution. The new bridge was designed keeping in mind all the

¹⁵ Port Commissioners Report, 1877, p. 3

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

objections of the canal authorities while providing a passage for the trains at ordinary level at a cost of about Rs. 90000.

Apart from the bridge, major problem arose with the connection of the jetties with the inland wharves and the Eastern Bengal railway line. The proposed tramway was passing through the Armenian Ghat station. The East Indian Railway Company did not agree to dismantle the station. I will study in detail the conflict regarding the tramway route, land to be taken up for that and the negotiations between the Port and railway authorities. The tram lines soon became profitable. Between 1880-81 and 1882-83, there was an increase of almost Rs. 15,000 in Tramway Receipts.¹⁸ Also, the increase in traffic necessitated opening up a third line (with already two lines for up and down traffic inaugurated in 1881) between Nimtollah Ghat and Ruthghat within a year of its functioning.¹⁹ Thus, the ways in which the roads and tramways were created give us a glimpse of the manner in which the port area was extended and got integrated with the rest of the city. I want to delve into the difficulties that arose regarding land or finance, negotiations between various branches of the government, and the general implication of this expansion for the trading activities of the Calcutta port.

¹⁸ P. Banerjee, *Calcutta and its Hinterland*, p. 41.

¹⁹ P. Banerjee, *Calcutta and its Hinterland*, p. 40.