

## Calcutta Port Complex and the Story of Indentured Labour

*Kaustubh Mani Sengupta*

From the latter part of the nineteenth century, industrial growth in India and a massive increase in import/export trade necessitated rapid development of port facilities in Calcutta. While sharing the major percentage of export trade in India during the early half of the twentieth century, the Calcutta port also emerged as a crucial entry-point for goods destined for the eastern and northern provinces of the subcontinent. Excellent transport routes, especially railways, acted as a catalyst for trading activities and, despite its unfavourable geographical features, the Calcutta port became the leading centre of trade and commerce for the colonial state in India.

Calcutta Port Trust was officially established in 1870, and it made rapid progress in building additional jetties and streamlining dock logistics and cargo handling. A new phase in the development of the Calcutta port complex took place from the 1880s. This was facilitated by the increase in import trade which brought about a corresponding increase in export trade as well as a greater demand for facilities to accommodate the steamers that were replacing sailing vessels. Many new additions to the dock complex were proposed, but the First World War halted the process. The post-war era put a lot of pressure on the Port Commissioners to replace the material taken during the war, but the cost of finance was almost 50–75 per cent higher than in the pre-war period. Up till 1921, few additions had been made to the Calcutta port and it took some time to restore it to its previous condition. Next major phase in port activities was during the WWII, when eastern India became a part of the war-effort for the British.

The ebb and flow of trading activities, connected with the general political and economic condition of India as a colony of the British Empire, shaped the ways in which the port complex developed in Calcutta. Along with the trading activities, Calcutta was also the main port of departure for indentured Indians to the Caribbean islands and other parts of the world during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indentured labourers were recruited from the vast hinterland of the Calcutta port—stretching from the Chotanagpur plateau in the west to the region of north-eastern states of present-day India. Some structures in the port area still bear the story of these migrants. A small pier bearing the unlikely name ‘Surinam Ghat’ is situated on the eastern bank of the river. As Purba Hossain (2017) remarks, “The ghat itself likely owes its name to the ‘Suriname Depot’ at Garden Reach, which gained importance with the sailing of the *Lalla Rookh* to Dutch Guiana (or Suriname) in 1873. Over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Garden Reach became the site of numerous depots where Indian indentured labourers were held before embarking for the sugar islands of the Caribbean and Mascarenes and other British, French, Danish, and Dutch colonies.” Thus, Garden Reach was the last stop for the labourers coming from other parts of eastern India before their departure to the sugar colonies. According to an emigration pass available in Guyana’s national archives (dated 1912), “61, Garden Reach” was the address of the “British Guiana Government Emigration Agency.” (Mohabir 2014)

From Hossain’s study we find mentions of several other addresses. She notes, “With the resumption of indentured migrations in 1842, a depot was opened at Bhowanipore in

Calcutta. The Bhowanipore Depot was initially meant to serve for emigration to Mauritius, but soon accommodated emigrants to Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, and Demerara as well. Later, separate depots for men and women destined for Trinidad and Tobago, Fiji, Saint Lucia, Saint Kitts, Saint Helena, and British Guyana were established at 5, 8, 11, and 71 Garden Reach. Migrants moving to Demerara, Natal, and the Caribbean Island of Nevis were kept at a depot at 25 Garden Reach, those moving to Surinam at 20 Garden Reach, and those migrating to Cayenne, Guadeloupe, and Martinique at 76 Garden Reach. The last two depots were managed by the Dutch and French governments, respectively.” (Hossain 2017)

These details provide us with a vivid history of migrant labourers and the central role of the Calcutta port complex in the global network of movements and migrations during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 2011, a monument was installed at Garden Reach, Kidderpore Docks to commemorate indentured workers who left India for plantation colonies. The port memorial was placed alongside a newly refurbished clock tower, renamed the Demerara Clock Tower, indicating the connection with the sugar colonies in the Caribbean. The monument carries the following words:

From Here They Set Forth . . . This memorial commemorates the thousands of indentured Indian workers who sailed from Kolkata Port between 1834 and 1920, to lands far away, seeking better livelihoods for themselves and their families. This is a celebration of their pioneering spirit, endurance, determination and resilience. They made significant contributions to their adopted countries, yet cherished and passed on the spirit of Indianness—culture, values, traditions—to their descendants.

A major source of information for these movements and migration is the *Annual Report on Emigration from the port of Calcutta to the British and Foreign Colonies*. These reports contain details of various administrative measures, the functioning of the emigration committee, the names of the emigration agencies for the several colonies, number of agencies at work, number of emigrants, etc. The reports also provide us with condition on the vessels, number of migrants ‘demanded’ by the colonies and actually ‘supplied’ by the British Indian government, and also the number of returnees.

## References

- Hossain, Purba. (2017). ‘Protests at the Colonial Capital: Calcutta and the Global Debates on Indenture, 1836-42’, *South Asian Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/02666030.2017.1297054
- Mohabir, Nalini. (2014). ‘Port of Departure, Port of Return: Mapping Indentured Returns to Calcutta’, *small axe*, DOI 10.1215/07990537-2739884
- Sengupta, Kaustubh Mani. (2018). ‘The Port of Calcutta in the Imperial Network of South and South-East Asia, 1870s-1950s’, in B. Neilson, N. Rossiter, R. Samaddar (eds), *Logistical Asia*
- Sutapa Das Dhar & Chandralekha Basu Ghosh, *Indian Emigrants to Sugar Colonies: A Study through Kolkata Port, 1842–1900*, Primus Books 2017