

Comments on Iman Mitra and Mithilesh Kumar : *Kolkata as a Logistic Hub with special reference to the port*

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I have read the draft paper authored by Mitra and Kumar with great interest. While commenting on the proposal for this paper in March, 2016 I made a number of lengthy points about the Calcutta port and tried to explore the further possibilities that such an interesting topic could open up. One such possibility appeared to me to be the relation between the logistic hub and the social. I am happy to see that now paper has taken us much forward to that direction. No doubt this is a well-written and well-argued paper. It has explored a history of Calcutta's future as one of the major logistical hubs in the emerging Asian economy. Like Path Dependency Theorists of 1980s and 1990s, Mitra and Kumar have considered the ways in which "history matters in economic processes but not always in the same ways". They are optimistic that Calcutta is sure to reap once again its Presidency dividend as the nerve centre of a number of infrastructural pathways.

The authors postulate that India's Look East/Act East policy is consistent with the revival of the Bay of Bengal as an important pathway of the 21st century capital. In this context they explore with considerable detail the convergence between ADB's aggressive financing of a number of giant infrastructural projects, and India's growing economic exchange with the ASEAN, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar and China in the last two decades. In this milieu Calcutta becomes the junction city of a multimodal transport network consisting of a vast already existing port installation, railway and highway networks, and at least two proposed trans-regional corridors. This is Calcutta of the 21st century—a port city and a service city of the British empire reinventing its regional relevance as a logistical hub. I have three concrete suggestions to table for the authors' consideration.

First, at times it appeared to me that the authors are so optimistic about Calcutta's logistical potential that their own writing becomes capital's autobiography. One should also possibly mention why the look east policy could never take off. I guess Calcutta's logistical future lies in the protracted economic crises and regime instabilities that India's potential South East Asian partners faced since the late 1990s, and could never recover fully in the succeeding two decades. The crisis of the 1990s hit India's look east policy hard. I wish, the authors will duly consider this aspect in the revised version of the paper.

Second, I wish that the authors would consider explaining the meaning of the logistical hub in the Toyotist regime of capitalist accumulation. We know that before the logistical revolution, i.e., in the Taylorist/Fordist economy, the producers used to determine commodity supply by their production processes in the "push economy". Michael Hardt (1999) says that communication between production and consumption (read market) was "mute"—that there was just a simple feedback mechanism. In other words, Hardt says that Fordist command "need not listen to the market closely". The dominant assumption of such an economy was that production would govern consumption. In addition, the Fordist value chain was rather discontinuous. The Toyotist principle on the other hand, is networked in which production and consumption is unified through information infrastructure. Now, there is a kind of "in-time" correspondence between production and consumption. Production is customised and rationalised to such an extent that the crisis of over-production can be minimised. Every production decision comes after market demands the product. This enables the Corporation further optimise production, curtail the size of the (idle)workforce, and change fashion of the product in every quarter.

In a way then, information network revolutionizes the framework of time—the gap between production and consumption. Hardt calls it informatization of production. The emphasis of research shifts from the Fordist/Taylorist shop floor (labour process) to the sphere of consumption. If Fordism was concentric, Toyotism is ever dispersing. The decentralized Toyotist system hinges on a more efficient synchronization between production and consumption. The logistical hub is a necessary constellation of infrastructures that aids this process of synchronization. The hub, or the “distribution centre” is precisely the point of a high technical sophistication of the logistical services involving automated unloading, loading, labelling of goods, and assembling of pallet loads. In the distribution centre, manufacturing of goods does not constitute the dominant economic activity. The goods are just collected, collated, assembled, or perhaps a little modified (Klose 2015). Under Toyotist “pull economy”, logistics refers to the “logic of cost reduction and of flexible product design grounded in the supposed need of the customers” (Klose 2015, 162). Note, the ancient Greeks knew logistics as a division of calculation that considered the practical solution of everyday problems (Klose 2015).

Calcutta’s transition to a logistics hub then means a lot—it encapsulates a larger change. In my early commentary on the proposal of this paper, I tried to persuade the authors to study the aesthetic registers of port cities and that of the logistical cities, and relate this with some of the inner city developments such as the internal displacement of certain population groups such as squatter colony dwellers, the hawkers and the working class groups around the city port in the wake of the look east policy. This leads me to my third insistence that the authors will also study the changing labour process in the port to tease out what the birth of the increasingly containerized logistical hub means to the workers. The container, argues Alexander Klose, is neither a vehicle, nor is it a just ordinary packing material. It is rather a magnet-like medium that automatically unites various kinds of land and water transport, “interrupting the interruption” caused by manual unloading. In the post Second World War era, the container principle, has come to substitute a number of crucial manual work of loading, packaging and unloading in the port. As a result, a huge coolie population working between the truck and the ship is becoming increasingly redundant with the arrival of the standardized, intermodal transport medium of the container. In short, containerization changed the fate, materiality and function of the 19th-20th century port. We know, the illustrious history of the London Port ended abruptly, making Tilbury at the mouth of the Thames a new site. The London dock workers didn’t take this lightly. They stopped the London port repeatedly between 1968 and 1970 (Ham and Rijsenbrij 2012). How are Calcutta dock workers reacting to containerization?

What is needed, then, in the most general term is what I said earlier, i.e., the rigorous politicization of the idea of the logistical hub. After Timothy Mitchell (2014) we can say that its apparent durability could also be the source of its speculative fragility. We need to think how the logistical hub can be a focus of our collective existence. This paper is a beginning of that dialogue.