

# Logistical Worlds: Infrastructure, Software, Labour (Book Review)

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This book comprises 11 different chapters written by different authors but revolving around the same topic: how globalization and the dynamics of logistics, information software, geopolitics, neo-capitalism, and other factors are affecting the world and, especially, labor markets and workers. Most of the elements related in this book have been geographically limited to the region of Kolkata and Siliguri, but the authors have also seen almost identical phenomena happening in nearby Bangladesh, Pakistan, or China. Moreover, the dynamics examined in the book could be extrapolated to the neoliberal system as a whole, as a part of a complex global structure of exploitation where technology and tradition, growth and precariousness, are inextricably mingled. Therefore, the different topics elaborated in these pages are a useful tool to rethink both regionally and globally the shortcomings of our “logistical worlds” and the options opened ahead.

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## Foreword by The Reviewer

The world of logistics is a world of paradoxes where the past touches the future, with precariousness being the glue that keeps these separate dimensions working together. It is not easy to conclude whether it would be better to continue on this economic path of growth in order to allow the people to achieve a better standard of living in the long-term, or whether we should take a more ethical—but hard to implement—stance against this form of development. The latter option would leave middle classes of the privileged countries of the world, and higher classes in poorer ones, without the benefits of the current neoliberal conjuncture; but it would be a fair price to pay in order to improve the situation of so many individuals affected by unacceptable working conditions, worsening environmental conditions, and scarcity of chances to improve their wellbeing.

## CHAPTER 1. ‘Buy Cheap, Sell Dear’. By Brett Neilson & Ned Rossiter

This chapter analyses, through a fieldwork visit to Kolkata’s markets and harbours, how logistics work in this particularly active city of India and its surroundings. The authors pinpoint how the state-of-the-art technologies coexist with traditional life: from internet-based container tracking systems to a paper in which a manager handwrites down where containers will move once they have arrived at Indian territory.

Similarly, they describe another shocking reality: despite all these large logistic companies, high technology, and great infrastructures, those services would not be possible without a labour regime based on workers that carry goods being paid by the weight they move. We can see how at the same time two different practices coexist: those of the new technologies of globalization and the old and basic hard work as it was one hundred years ago. Moreover, the 'extraction' of value is not generally accounted, those assets are somehow 'invisible' at the top of the iceberg of the logistic system, and, hence, are 'expendable or exploitable precisely because they do not register on the screens or in the processors where value comes to be measured' (p. 9).

## **CHAPTER 2. Kolkata Port: Challenges of Geopolitics and Globalization. By Subhir Baumik**

This chapter tell us about Kolkata's strategic situation between Asia and Europe, and as the most important node for connection with South East Asia and East Asia. Kolkata is a key piece in the Chinese plans for a New Silk Road. In order to avoid the strait of Malacca 'chokepoint', China sees with special interest linking the cities of Kunming and Kolkata, something that India is not so enthusiastic about. It also serves as the official port for Nepal and Bhutan, helping India to keep these allies closer. Even if the corridor between Kolkata and Kunming does not come to be a reality soon, this Indian city will remain the 'starting point' for India's policy of connection with the East.

But Kolkata is 232 km inland from the sea and the decreasing draught both in Kolkata and the secondary port of Haldia is increasing its costs of operation, endangering the growth in cargo volume. For that reason, the Indian Government sees as essential the construction of a deeper port that would make unnecessary the large expenditure in dredging the river that leads to Kolkata's ports. It remains a question whether it will be built in Sagar or in Tajpur.

## **CHAPTER 3. Warehouse and Transport Facilities in the Port of Calcutta. By Kaustubh Mani Sengupta**

This chapter is centered on the evolution of Kolkata's port since the 1870s and up to the 1950s, giving a historical representation of how different public and private interests fought for the logistic business growing on the shores along the river. Agreements about the uses of the new warehouses and the controversies about the use of land or trade charges are among the main 'difficulties associated with the initial phases of design and construction of warehouses' (p. 24) in this port.

Problems only continued as the port's activity increased with the years, finding more and more problems regarding the use of the available—scarce—space. As a consequence of this, new transport routes had to be created to alleviate the shortening space in the docks. Railway developed and played a crucial role in facilitating the logistic operations in the port. New roads and tramways also had to be laid down gradually in order to move bulk cargo to the vicinity of the port, extending the port area and integrating it with the rest of the city.

## **CHAPTER 4. Space(s) of Calculability and Financialization in the Kolkata Port. By Iman Mitra**

A complex network of infrastructure, software, and labour made possible operations in Kolkata port, 223 km inland through one of the longest navigational channels in the world. In this chapter, the author then enters into a historical description of the advances made in Indians ports, especially in

Kolkata's port since the 1870s, explaining the influence of the several 'Five Years Plan' that the Indian Government executed until the present in order to improve port's capabilities and functioning.

All those improvements made the port survive all the difficulties faced due to its geological location and administrative challenges. The effects have been positive since by 2013-14 all date suggests that the port is growing in terms of container traffic handling. But another important reason for this growth is Kolkata's key position in the Chinese-planned New Silk Route. The auspicious future of the port, as a consequence, attracts even more investment for the modernization of its facilities. As a result, land speculation and rent extraction are expected. All these are performed by the company KPT, a powerful sector enterprise.

#### **CHAPTER 5. Trade Unions, Informalization and Contract Labour in West Bengal's Docks. By Immanuel Ness**

This chapter revolves around working conditions in India, 'where the vast majority of labourers work for independent contractors', and do so 'under the most oppressive, dangerous and super-exploitative conditions' (p. 41). This represents a challenge for Indian society since more and more workers move from rural areas to crowded urban centers, where they live in shameful conditions. 93% of Indian workers are 'informal' workers, with miserable salaries that suppose an 'economic advantage' for India and its companies. This 'informalization' is contagious and wages and working conditions are also eroding for the small share of India's 'formal' working class.

Moreover, investment in new technologies in order to replace labour only increases the problem, since it reduces the number of 'living-wage jobs' and pushes the remaining workers into precariousness. Informalization is a way in which port authorities avoid the 'propensity of dockworkers to unionize' (p. 43).

#### **CHAPTER 6. Who are the Port Workers and How Do We Study Them? By Mithilesh Kumar**

For the union, 'all workers who have any connection with the port are port workers' (p. 51), although not all workers would have the same status. Strategies to organize workers in a progressively more globalized and interconnected context supposes a challenge. Outsourcing is another mechanism that makes it more difficult to organize workers into unions, for it is essential to be clear about who actually is a 'port worker'. Ports are places where a 'partition of borders' (p. 54) do occur, with different legal categories among different kind of workers, making problematic to define in each case who is a 'port worker'.

#### **CHAPTER 7. A Logistical Earthquake: Between Kolkata and Valparaíso. Elisabeth Simbürger**

Manual workers are an essential part of the logistics of the port, loading and unloading heavy bags all around. Many others work in informal business somehow related to the port, but it is not always easy to figure out where does the work for the port begins and ends. These uncertainties open a debate about labour rights which is not easy to answer. The author describes the hard labour of Indian workers in the docks, with high working hours, small salaries, and no assurances about their conditions for the next day. However, unions in Kolkata have not staged a major strike since 1984. The author compares this situation with that of Valparaíso, in Chile, where a strike in 2016 changed

the conditions of the dockworkers for the better. Nevertheless, increasing violence and insubordination by the workers is arising as a form of struggle.

### **CHAPTER 8. Varieties of Port Labour Politics. By Carolin Philipp**

The author considers that precarious working conditions around ports in different countries of the world (Germany, Greece, and India in this case) share certain similarities but also many differences. To begin with, Haldia port near Kolkata is publicly owned, while the Greek port of Piraeus is privately owned by the Chinese company Cosco Pacific.

After the crisis in Greece, austerity measures ended up reducing salaries and damaging labour conditions, at the same time that privatizing some public properties, like Piraeus port. In India, all ports are public although the government is following a tendency towards a progressive public-private partnership. Nevertheless, most workers are hired through private companies, with working conditions weakened: lower salaries, temporal jobs, no access to welfare and pensions, etc. Even permanent workers have seen their condition deteriorated since the fear of losing their jobs reduces the will to protest. The conclusion is that the tendency towards privatization results in 'precariousness and deterioration of working conditions' (p. 75).

### **CHAPTER 9. Haldia, a Port City in India. By Samata Biswas**

The researcher relates how after spending several days meeting with personalities related to Haldia port, all the people interviewed had been men. Indeed, there were no women at all, since port areas were segregated by gender. Nonetheless, the role of women is also important for the logistical apparatus of the port, even if just performing 'minor' jobs.

When the port was built in 1968 it affected people in different ways: while some got large amounts of income through the new project, others were moved from those lands and became homeless and unemployed, while others got a job but not housing and vice versa. Finally, the role of men and women is one in which the latter are victims of even more precariousness and exploitation than the former, marginalized and ill-paid but still essential for the supply chain.

### **CHAPTER 10. The 'Untimely' Metropolis of Siliguri. By Atig Ghosh**

Siliguri is placed in a choke point, a narrow corridor that links North-East India and Bhutan with the rest of India. The city is near Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and China, and due to its strategic relevance, large military forces bases are sited in its surroundings, which helped to increase the development of the area. Of course, it is also an important city for the New Silk Road project. All these factors have made the population of Siliguri explode.

The city is comprised of migrants from many different regions and ethnic groups, many of them living in slums as 'temporary' residents. The author describes many of the citizens of the city as people 'in transit', although they could be working in town for years. It was proposed that the area should become a free trade zone where Indians, Nepalese, Bangladeshi and Bhutanese could trade without restrictions; however, in fact, nowadays the bazaars of Siliguri are already thriving with activity and

goods coming from all those countries, either legally and illegally smuggled products. The unique context of Siliguri makes it what the author calls a “futuristic archetype” of a border-city’.

### **CHAPTER 11. Resilient Hope. By Orit Halpern.**

The author begins this chapter with a humorous and clever paragraph about how the role of concrete as the preferred material for modernization since the 19th century. There is a juxtaposition between that old heavy world of cement and the new technological world of speed and algorithms. But they are still closely interrelated, linked by ‘resilience’.

The chapter then enters into a description of some real cases. The roads connecting China with India through Tibet need huge amounts of concrete, which requires sand that is largely extracted from the river beds in Siliguri. It is described as an act of ‘environmental and human devastation’ (p. 92), all for the sake of obtaining the necessary sand that fuels both the construction boom of infrastructure and real state speculation in the region and throughout India. This not only destroys the rivers and the source of water, an ecological disaster, but it also increases the particulates of dust in the air, worsening its quality and affecting public health.

Meanwhile, new cities are being built just for speculation ends, with buildings that might never be occupied. All the destruction and construction without measure is supported by what the author calls ‘resilient hope’. Hope that high-technology and computing ‘imagine our future’ (p. 99), despite the destruction of the environment. Technology becomes the solution for all sorts of political, environmental, natural, or historical predicaments. The author then challenges this view and asks for a new model in design and politics that will end with that destruction of our world.