

India's Shipbreaking Business, Emerging Economies, and the "Right to Pollute"

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In developing countries, shipbreaking is considered a dirty and hazardous practice, unlike in developed countries. Not only is shipbreaking an outmoded and labor-intensive activity in these so-called "peripheral" countries, but the surrounding oceans function merely as reservoirs for toxic wastes. My project uses as a case study the example of Alang-Sosiya Ship Breaking Yard (henceforth ASSBY), which is situated on the northwest coast of India in the state of Gujarat. This shipbreaking yard, the second largest "graveyard," in the world, is well known for "ship recycling" across the globe. Its ideal climatic and topographical conditions have helped to nurture this hazardous industry—one of reasons shipbreaking has shifted here from the Mumbai center, which currently scraps only small vessels. With the beaching of *M. V. Kota Tenjong* on 13 February 1983, shipbreaking became a full-time activity. This forever transformed the pristine beaches at the Gulf of Cambay, contaminating its shores with high levels of heavy metals and toxic organic compounds, and destroying its scenic beauty as dilapidated ghettos emanated from its surroundings when employment opportunities began to increase.

Scholarly works on shipbreaking, particularly with regard to India, have largely reflected on the "descriptive" aspects, for instance the working conditions, and the occupational and—to a certain extent—ecological hazards that result from ship scrapping. Numerous publicized cases have been investigated, such as the *Blue Lady* (2007) and *Clemenceau* (2009), both of which critiqued the very idea of decommissioning and dumping of toxic waste in Indian waters.

However, instances of private ships and other state ships remain peripheral to these discussions. I am particularly interested in how various stakeholders (both national and international), exploit existing loopholes in the legislation of the Basel Convention. Further, returning to the Indian context, I wish to investigate how the transition from traditional agricultural activity to industrial activity affects labor patterns in Alang-Sosiya and the nearby villages. What repercussions does shipbreaking have on the flora and fauna of this coastal region? Moreover, what kinds of economic theories sustain this industry? These are some of the questions that have remained under the radar in historical studies. Therefore, using India as a case study, this project aims to extrapolate the politics of the environment, discourses, and practices of ship demolition from the early 1990s to the contemporary period.

Objectives of the Study

Using waste as a vantage point, the major objectives of this study are:

- To trace the historical roots of "garbage imperialism" and to connect it particularly to South Asian countries, with an emphasis to the Indian context;
- To explore the often fluid definitions of hazardous waste by investigating both the national and international contexts, and to define the disparate dimensions of waste—not just its evident spatial aspect;
- To determine the reasons behind the emergence of "ghost-acres" by examining the economic theories that drive the shipbreaking industry;
- To identify the various political and nonpolitical actors by teasing out the multiple vulnerabilities, such as environmental pollution and destruction, as well to understand the complicated layering of disjointed regulations, objectives of the shipping industry, international law, and the Indian government.
- To critically establish why transboundary movement of toxic waste occurs from the "core" to the "periphery" in the first place, thereby bringing into question the effectiveness of international institutions. This is followed by an inquiry into the reasons why India has agreed to become a waste disposal site for developed countries and suffer the ramifications of aiding this industry.
- To conduct a comparative analysis with other small shipbreaking centers, for instance in Kolkata and Mumbai, in an effort to map the similarities and differences, and to bring a more holistic perspective to the proposed study.