

Foreword

It's 17th October again – the red-letter day in our port's calendar and we are commemorating the 137th Anniversary of the multi-splendoured existence of our Kolkata port. During the past 136 glorious years, Kolkata Port has charted a course of development and diversification, taking a position of eminence in the maritime map of the country, a rare distinction which very few institutions worth its age can match.

The annular rings of a tree tells you its age while interestingly, for an institution, the mere number of years it has put together since its inception, does not necessarily bear any direct testimony to its specific 'value addition' to the society unless the same, translated in terms of its varied proficiency and acumen, has contributions flowing to the various corners of the society at large.

For the riverine port of Kolkata, competing as it is with other major sea ports of the country, functioning as the gateway for trade and commerce in the eastern region of the country and gradually developing a sprawling socio-cultural edifice of its own, coterminous with the evolution of Kolkata – the 'City of Joy', makes by itself a fascinating commentary.

The expanse of time signaling the official commencement of the journey of the Port Commissioners, viz. 17th October, 1870 – the very mile-post we are presently commemorating, as we are all aware,

signifies only a part of its formalized, institutional existence which came to the fore by dint of the historic Act V of 1870 ; though the port and shipping activities at Calcutta had commenced as early as in 1690, even predating the setting up of the marine establishment of the East India Company in 1758.

Historically, it was a series of fascinating and tumultuous developments, say, from founding of a marine yard by Colonel Watson in 1780, setting up of the first dry dock in Calcutta in 1790 (which, however, closed down in 1808) to other well-meaning attempts of building docks at Diamond Harbour (around 1833), Port Canning on the river Matla (1865-66) – till the formation of River Trust in 1866, finally heralding the birth of the Port Commissioners of Calcutta, the reaching of the ‘Holy Grail’, as it were, a few years later.

From the six screw piled Calcutta jetties handling 143 vessels with a net tonnage of 2,22,446 in 1870-71, Kolkata Port, as it evolved through these years, has indeed traversed a long way to cater to over 55 million tonnes of cargo traffic in 2006-07. Even as a historic déjà vu or coincidence of sorts, sailing almost 175 years down the time line, since the port’s maiden effort in 1833, we are now once again moving ahead with a proposal for construction of riverside container jetties at Diamond Harbour, in order to harness the potential of higher drafts of our riverine system and the benefits of reduced turn around time/higher parcel load for the vessels visiting our port.

From an inward looking, largely autarkic state of economy, hinging primarily on the principle of conservation of foreign exchange through development of domestic enterprise and import substitution etc, India opened its frontiers in the early '90s to integrate with the global trade. In the new regime of liberalization and globalization, Indian economy witnessed a spectacular growth of around 8-9 % on an annualized basis and its exports have also grown at a healthy 20% over the last few years, despite a hardening of the rupee vis-à-vis dollar, in recent times. With about 95% of the country's international trade volume (70% by value) being carried through maritime transport, the pressure has already been steadily piling upon the port sector to commensurately enhance its infrastructural capacity to cater to a traffic demand of 1.5 billion tonnes by 2014-15.

From a cumulative annual traffic that had virtually plateaued in the range of 30 million tonnes in 2001-02, Kolkata Port has, in the meanwhile, taken a slew of measures to tone up its service profile aimed at realizing better customer satisfaction, to clock a record level of 55.05 million tonnes in 2006-07, thus registering the second highest growth in traffic among all the Indian Major ports in the last five years. Interestingly, 2006-07 is also the third successive year when the port, in terms of the annual volume of traffic handled, has been able to retain its second position among Indian Major Ports. It is a matter of pride that Kolkata Port is the only port after Visakhapatnam, among all Major Ports of the country, to have exceeded the 55 million

tonnes mark in 2006-2007. In tune with the necessity of a huge capacity build-up of our port sector, Kolkata Port too, has embarked upon an ambitious modernisation drive, making investments in construction/mechanization of berths/jetties/ deepening of channels, procurement of flotilla, induction of state-of-the-art-equipment etc and offering matching logistics, to make it, veritably, a gateway port of the East.

It is for the fourth year in succession that, in commemoration of our port's birthday and its multifaceted achievements, we have been organising anniversary lectures, giving a free rein to the savants, some of our society's prolific minds, to set their own terms of the morning's agenda - to deliberate on a wide range of issues, from sciences, environment and society etal, giving us the much needed intellectual drive and stimuli to stay tuned to our times. This unique way of looking at ourselves from a close, impersonal distance, is almost like an annual tryst with time, which helps us to unwind the past, connect them to the present and take enduring lessons for the future.

This year, we are extremely grateful to find amongst us Prof. André Béteille, FBA, Chancellor, North-Eastern Hill University & Chairman, Indian Council of Social Science Research, an internationally acclaimed pioneer of social engineering per se, who by his sheer immensity of scholarship and erudition, has been a leading thinker, a visionary of our times. He had been gracious

enough to deliver the 137th KoPT Anniversary Address entitled “Caste Today”.

Dr. S.Z. Qasim , Chairman, World Environment Foundation & Former Member, Planning Commission and a pioneering thinker in ocean sciences and development in India has been kind enough to deliver the keynote address titled “ Corporate Response to Climate Change”.

In a way, very interestingly, both the issues being deliberated are thematically wedded in that they address the concerns, which critically impinge on the developmental prerogatives of our society. As we are aware, any mainstream market-driven developments we try to attain, often get hamstrung by the prevalent iniquitous social practices of which the fratricidal caste system, insofar as it has divided our society into a number of schisms, is undoubtedly one of the most potent social scourges, acting as a drag on our future advancement. Indeed, the issue of development, if it has to be sustained, made deep-rooted and irreversible, has to factor in within its broad fold, these various elements of social aberrations and perhaps aim at creating a broad-based institutional structure, which would be able to absorb and assimilate the trigger effects of the same, in our multi-layered societal leitmotif and make the process of development, both dynamic and inclusive. We would like to be enlightened by Prof Bêteille’s profound vision in this regard.

Again, the very dialectics of developmental prerogatives, stemming as they are from widely prevalent and perceived socio-economic realities, also cannot possibly be divorced or even side-stepped from the very genuine environmental issues which are at stake; it is perhaps only through a dispassionate gleaning of the society's fertile minds, involving the social scientists, planners, environmentalists, opinion leaders et al, culled from diverse sections of the social spectrum, may we, with a broad measure of political consensus, identify and implement the core, inalienable environmental imperatives to allow the development process, chart its ordained course ! Prof. Qasim's enlightened discourse would help us identify the corporate responsibilities for combating some of these challenges, in order to forge a well-knit developmental path for the future.

We hope the learned discourses of the savants would allow 'a feast of reason and a flow of soul', a good churning of our minds, to keep us intellectually nourished and satiated and help the port management ideate on a string of issues and policies to script exciting lessons for the port's future.

Kolkata
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Dr. A.K. Chanda
Chairman
Kolkata Port Trust
