India’s Ship-Scraping Industry: Monument to the Abuse of Human Labour and the Environment

For the 36,000 migrant labourers working in Alang, Gujarat, the sound of the magnificent Arabian Sea is drowned in the deafening ship-breaking activity and the fresh ocean air is clogged with the fumes of welding torches. They have come from the most backward states of India: Bihar, Orissa, and eastern Uttar Pradesh. Extreme poverty and unemployment has compelled them to migrate to the ship-breaking yards of Alang. Desperate for work, they have taken up jobs that the local Gujarati labourer considers too risky, cutting open toxic-laced ships using the most primitive methods, under hazardous working conditions.

The ship-breakers, who own the ship-breaking plots, buy scrap ships in the international market and get them dismantled by the migrant labourers that they have employed on a contract basis, are rather feudalistic in their attitude towards the labourers. Whatever little concern they may have for the working and living conditions of the labourers and environmental pollution arises from the fact that, of late, Alang has been receiving a lot of adverse publicity in the national and international media due to the large number of accidents and deaths of its workers over the last couple of years. Since 1996, over 400 fires have broken out and around 200 labourers have died. This has led to pressure groups within ship-owning countries urging their governments not to send their ships to scrapyards with poor safety and environmental records. The ship-breakers, on their part, insist that the ship-owners should de-contaminate the ships before selling them off to the scrapyards. The Gujarat Maritime Board (GMB), a government body responsible for regulating ship-breaking activity and for protection and maintenance of basic infrastructure facilities at Alang, has laid down some safety and environmental regulations to be followed during ship-breaking, but has limited powers to implement them due to the economic and political clout enjoyed by the ship-breakers. Non-governmental organizations in India as well as international, such as Greenpeace, are of the opinion that in accordance with the Basel Convention, which decrees that exporting nations and polluting industries have to take care of their own toxic waste, ships should be cleaned of all toxic materials in Western countries before they are to be scrapped in Asia. But until that happens, the labourers and the environment at Alang will continue to get a raw deal.

By Rupa Abdi

The above conference was held at the Institute of Geography, part of the GeoCenter of the University of Copenhagen. In addition to funding provided by IAS, the conference was sponsored by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Danish National Research Foundation, the Danish Social Science Research Council, North/South Priority Research Area (University of Copenhagen), the Danish Agricultural and Veterinary Research Council, the Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University (Copenhagen), and the Institute of Geography (University of Copenhagen).