

India's Ship-Scrapping Industry Monument to the Abuse of Human Labour and the Environment

Report >
South Asia

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 toxin-laced ships using the most primitive methods, under hazardous working conditions.



Both photos Courtesy of Derek Elias, UNESCO, CSI

By Rupa Abdi

After 25 to 30 years, when ships are at the end of their sailing life, they are sold to scrapyards in order to be dismantled so as to recover the valuable steel which constitutes almost 95 per cent of the ship. India is the world's largest ship-breaking nation by volume, and in India, Alang is the main centre of ship-breaking activities. The 6,000 metric tonnes of steel that come out of Alang every day, on average, account for about 15 per cent of the country's total steel output. At about half the cost of regular furnace-based plants, this output contributes massive revenue in terms of custom duty, excise duty, sales tax, and so on, to central and state government exchequers.

Ship-scraping around the globe exemplifies both the potentialities and the dangers of an increasingly globalized economy. Northern corporations seek to delocalize their activities (and waste producers, their hazardous materials) to southern countries, which are unwilling to enforce internationally acceptable environmental and labour conditions for fear of the industry relocating to an even lower cost country.

Ship-breaking may create job opportunities for thousands of labourers and contribute to the economic growth of these regions, but exposes the labour force to risks of death, serious injury, and chronic health problems. During the scraping process hazardous wastes are released into the environment, and labourers are exposed to toxic substances. In short, economic profit gains precedence over environmental health and labour rights.

Alang ship-scraping yard.

Ship-scraping at Alang violates numerous national and international regulations related to pollution, hazardous wastes, and labour rights. Established in 1982 and built on the sweat and blood of migrant labourers, Alang has grown to be the world's biggest ship-breaking yard, a monument to the outrageous abuse of human labour and environment. The labourers in Alang live in poor housing and sanitary conditions and little attention is paid to their health and safety concerns. According to the physicians in and around Alang who treat numerous Alang patients, the combination of hazardous working conditions, congested and unhygienic living conditions, poor quality drinking water, availability of illicit country liquor, and rampant homosexuality and prostitution have given rise to a number of skin, gastrointestinal, and liver diseases besides tuberculosis, leprosy, malaria, malnutrition, cancer, HIV-AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases (STD). According to the local Bhavnagar Blood Bank office at Alang, besides 38 confirmed cases of AIDS, about 50-55 new cases of other STD are being reported every week among the labourers. This is probably the tip of the iceberg. There is a severe lack of medical facilities at Alang. The main facility is the Red Cross Hospital which is inadequate to meet the health requirements of 36,000 labourers. Serious cases are referred to the Civil Hospital at Bhavnagar, 55 kilometres away. The violation of the civil and labour rights of these workers is common. In fact, they are low paid, are provided no systematic job training, and do the ship-dismantling work with insufficient protective gear. As a result, injuries and deaths due to accidents are common.

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 scrapping yards with poor safety and environment 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 provision 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. ◀

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