

Containerisation in the Indian Ocean Shipping: A Comparative Study on Calcutta, Bombay and Singapore Ports, 1965s-2000

ABSTRACT

In the postwar world, one of the major changes that took place in the fields of international business and economics was the structural changes in shipping. These include the technical modernisation of infrastructure, the size of the fleets, changes in the composition of traded commodities, and, after all, the institutional mechanisation of ports. The introduction of containers in maritime trade since the 1950s, which is being called "transnational capitalism," represents the most significant technological and organisational rupture in maritime transport. It not only transformed the field of oceanic transportation but also equally reshaped the global economic nexus, trade growth, and prosperity of the nations. While the expansion of containerisation in the West started in the 1950s, developing countries in Asia started to implement it in the 1970s and 1980s. This research focuses on the expansion, development, and implementation of containerisation, or container technology, in the Indian Ocean arena from a historical perspective, taking its peak period of growth from the 1960s to the 2000s. With a case study of three major international ports, this research contains four different yet interlinked aspects: First, it examines how countries and national governments have paid considerable attention to this new technology. Second, my second area of study is the various Non-State Actors (NSAs) that include the Port Trusts, European international shipping companies, exporters, importers, and various Chambers of Commerce throughout Asia that responded to the implementation of container technology and modernisation in shipping. Third, it also considers assessing the role of various international actors and their recommendations, expert advice, and contributions to make the containerisation project successful in Asian ports. These include various transnational banks, study groups, European development institutions, and some global maritime institutions. Fourth, along with the historical account, this research makes an effort to assess how, and to what extent, the use of containers has affected transport costs in maritime trade and business in Asia. By and large, this project seeks to explore the globalisation of shipping in the developing world from the below-nation-state level in the days of worldwide adoption of import substitution and Europe's role in postwar Asian maritime transformation.

I argue in this thesis that the introduction of a very little metal box—a container—has transformed the whole oceanic world of the twentieth century on both sides of the Suez. However, this research focuses mainly on the growth of containerisation and container shipping in the waters east of Suez, with a case study of three major international ports. It explores three basic questions: Was there a precondition for containerisation in the Asian ports? Did containers, as a harbinger of twentieth-century globalisation in Asian waters, bring any structural changes in the vast realm of the maritime domain, such as port policy, customs, and logistics? And did the adaptation of the containerisation project fetch a fruitful result in terms of economies of scale in the Asian economy?

Based on the vast archival records of the maritime trade and economy from both government and corporate firms located in five major cities—Calcutta, Bombay, New Delhi, Ahmedabad, and Singapore—this research has demonstrated that, prior to containerisation, Asian ports featured complex collaboration among stakeholders and supported vibrant international trade networks. The findings highlight that containerisation introduced greater operational efficiency, reshaped economic relationships among port users—importers, exporters, freight-forwarders, stevedores, shippers, shipowners, and government—and shifted the balance of benefits towards those able to adapt rapidly. By and large, the thesis has examined and established how containerisation fundamentally altered the maritime landscape of the Indian Ocean World.

Academically, my research will contribute to four histories of postcolonial developing states: First, rather than nation-state-led histories, it focuses on different bilateral and multilateral trade agreements between port trusts, private shipping companies, maritime institutions, and international development agencies/banks that played a big part in the economic development of Asia/India after 1945. Second, this research will advance knowledge of the role that FDI exports played in developing nations following the fall of Britain's global empires in Asia and the inclusion of the US and other non-traditional maritime powers, such as Greece and Japan, in the Asian economic landscape. Third, this research will explore how the need for huge capital investment in containerisation paved the way for the gradual participation and inclusion of privatisation in the Indian public sphere since the 1970s. Fourth, the history of containerisation in India will help us to know about the future of the Swadeshi spirit in the post-independent period, as well as the little-known history behind the rise of major national shipping firms like Great Eastern and Scindia in world trade.