

**The Edges of Capitalism: Where Shipbreakers Meet Gully-Gold Miners  
*On the Remnants of Capitalist Mode of Production and the Vicious  
Conditioning of Alienated Labour: With Special Reference to Bangladesh  
and Sri Lanka***

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**Introduction**

The ultimate logic of market fundamentalism which advocates, market does allocate resources efficiently among competitive member of the society is simply nothing but ‘poor philosophy’ of ignorance and ambiguity (Marx 1953, Keynes 1962 and Chang 2010). Market is a power mechanism. It separates humans, ignores humanity, stripes empathy and teaches humans how to be extremely narcissistic. What you see as the edge of the capitalist society we are living in – or – what you see as the edges of the existing economic reality is not actually the ‘edge’ of it. What you see as the edge or the end of our political economy of life is absolutely nothing but a mental depiction of fundamentally fetish power arms of market mechanism. Purchasing power is not merely a monetary expression. It contains power – not only certain abilities to perform in the market but also a certain restrictions to perform as well. It is true that purchasing power indicates your identity in the market but at the same time it agitates yourself and reflects your true nature of isolation from other human beings in the society. As an internal organ of the development of capitalism, historically, this alienated nature of human beings flourished and survived the play as consuming and exploitation the very fact, alienated nature of humans

under capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Thus, this practice has been guiding us to demarcate our own ‘preferred-limits’ in the society – *What is my range and what is not? – What do I care and what do I do not care?*

This study attempts to look beyond the given edges or demarcations of contemporary capitalism with respect to key labour exploitative mechanisms in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The focus of this study is to critically examine the historical transformation of capitalist market fundamentalism in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, through a comparative aspect of analysis; with respect to labour exploitation and conditioning of alienated labour. The study put forward its hypothesis which as, the market fundamentalism (*neoliberalism*) historically left off– ignored – and inhumanly exploited – a group of people who belong to a certain class structure in the economy while it is heading towards the demarcated destination of capitalist development. The study argues that this ignorant is not something *accidental* or *involuntary*, as the theoreticians of market fundamentalism argues that this so called ‘externalities’ can be compensated through the internal mechanisms of market itself. The study tries to synthesise an argument that goes against this fundamentalism; which shows that, markets cannot do anything to take actions against this marginalization process and, more decisively, markets create the effect, markets sustain it and, more dangerously, as an internal mechanism markets need such a class structure to do certain activities and tasks in the process of fulfilling market’s ‘roundaboutness’.

## **Objective**

The foremost objective of this paper is to critically examine the historical setting of capitalism, with special reference to the shipbreaking industry in Bangladesh and gully-gold mining in Sri Lanka, and its ultimate use of alienated labour to conditionalize humans in order to restore the profitable

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<sup>1</sup> You are exploited and being alienated further more because of the fact that ‘*who you are*’ in the capitalist setting.

means of productions which remains in the state of ‘remnants’<sup>2</sup> as a result of the historical development of capitalist mode of production.

## Methodology

This study is fundamentally a qualitative one. The methodology of this study consisted with two main dimensions. First dimension, two case studies, has been focused to attain the objectives of this study with a broadly extended comparativeness on the research contexts, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka (*Chittagong and Hettiweediya, Colombo*). The second dimension, observing secondary data on both contexts, has been focused to gather sufficient scientific evidence on both cases.

The instant optimism of this paper is to rationalize and reemphasize the validity of the Marxian and neo-Marxian conceptualization of ‘Alienation of human beings under capitalism’ in the phase of, as the study put forward, late capitalism. This effort can be identified as a revisit to the concept alienation – through a realistic discussion but not through a theoretical discourse.

This specific paper can be identified as a part, as a single academic theorization of a series of papers which are going to be written and to be presented under the major topic ‘The Edges of Capitalism’. The exclusive intention of ‘the edges of capitalism’ is to discover the exploitative, on one hand, and on the other hand highly alienating, even though globally accepted and became the ‘common sense’, dynamism of modern day capitalism.

## Results and Discussion

When we consider both countries, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, it is possible to observe that the absolute logics of neoliberalism already invaded the economic structure, almost completely. The cultural, political and ethical structure have been failed (*they actually meant to be failed*) when the political authorities of

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<sup>2</sup> Remnants – In case of Shipbreaking industry the remnants are ships that have been decided to be demolished and in case of Gully-gold mining the remnant is gold dust which washed-out and restored inside the sewage channels.

both countries decided to go with the open market economic system. There were number of other proxy-factors adjoined with the justifications political leaders of both countries put forward before the citizens as they were opening the economics. Nevertheless this paper is not willing to discuss about that factors in detail. However, it is possible to see both countries are suffering from an unending cycle of poverty for decades, Bangladesh since the separation in 1971 and Sri Lanka since the independence in 1948.

### ***The Edges of Capitalism: where shipbreakers meet gully-gold miners***

The shipbreaking as a well-established industry and gully-gold mining as, even, an unnoticed employment, would not indicate any similarity in terms of modern capitalistic interpretations. But the study argues that, fundamentally these two industries are based on (and historically originated, established and expanded) the contradictory development of capitalism of both countries. In other words, fundamentally, with respect to the both contexts, if you raise following questions, the study concludes that – you will end up with similar answers and similar voices of human tragedies.

1. Why do you work?
2. How do you work?
3. What do you earn/ gain?
4. For whom do you earn?
5. Are you satisfied?

As capitalism and its modern game player (phase) neoliberalism make the human society unbelievably narcissistic it made us unaware of what is truly going on with the people around us (*right now, the feeling empathy is something occasional and institutional*).

### ***Shipbreaking Industry in Bangladesh: Gravity-troika of labour and Alienated Labour***

The labour exploitative mechanism in the Shipbreaking yards in Bangladesh is inhuman and highly connected with the historical separation of means of production from economically powerless people (*the development of the*

*violent history of capitalism*).<sup>3</sup> It is true that the entire economic system exists in the shipbreaking yard are a being feed and provoked by the vicious cycle of chronicle poverty in Bangladesh. But which system created that chronicle poverty and broaden to the stage of this? Is it possible to see this very system wholeheartedly puts an effort to break the cycle of poverty? Or already wasn't it proved that it is failed to do that but successful in worsening the situation? These are the questions to be raised. Due to the fact that the '*unreachablen tragic situations*'<sup>4</sup> in the entire ship breaking industry in Bangladesh the researchers decided to keep the focus on one of the major shipbreaking yards, which is located in Chittagong.<sup>5</sup>

There are two major categories of shipbreaking labourers, Regular workers and Casual workers. Regular labour category is consisted with Foremen, Filters, Gas cutters, Crane operators, Truck drivers and Rhythmic callers/ singers. The second category, casual labourers, is consisted with On-board removers, Chain and Cable movers, Remaining fuel and hydrocarbon fillers and Mud sweepers etc. The shipbreaking industry is fundamentally a labour-dominant even though the labour intensively has been reshaped by introducing new technology and cutting equipments in the recent past. The profit generation of capitalist owners, historically as well and contemporarily, blessed with the alienated labour stock in the entire country; majority including flood- displaced men, women and children lived along the villages of *Jamuna* and *Feni* rivers, *Comila*, *Chandpur*, *Lakshmipur* and *Bhola* etc. The study was able to identify a 'gravity-troika' which pressures on alienated labour in this unique edge of capitalism.

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<sup>3</sup> 30,000 labourers directly and between 100,000-200,00 labourers indirectly employed in the industry (*Childbreaking yards: Child Labour in the ship Recycling Industry in Bangladesh*)

<sup>4</sup> '*No one cares the tears of us, no one feels the pain of our hard work, no one hears the crying inside our hearts...we the people working here with hope and courage to see the sunshine of new days which may bring messages to live as human beings*' ( *Interview* )

<sup>5</sup> Chittagong shipbreaking yard extended up to 7Kms along the south-eastern coast of Bangladesh.

The gravity for alienated labour exists in this shipbreaking yard can be categorized into three aspects.

1. **The gravity of no-means of productions**
2. **The gravity of human tragedies**
3. **The gravity of a better life**

The alienated labour at the Chittagong shipbreaking site, as in all other sites, can be considered as the driving force of a highly active and a profitable industry. The gravities mentioned above pressure up the human conditions and make them to alternate human conditions to face 'extreme conditions' at the working site. People get engaged and do their best, even though tangled up with 'human questions'. A key conclusion we can derive here, in related to the 'nature of conditionality' under the pressure of exploitative mechanism of capital and alienated labour.

Related to this context, one of the clever questions one must be raised is that, why Bangladesh became the world's leading shipbreaker but not the largest shipbuilder? And on the other hand, why world's largest ship builders like China, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Germany and USA are even paying their attention to do the breaking job? The answer relies on the political economic structure in each of these countries, is it possible to move or force their people to work on this kind of extreme labour supplying mode at the pressure of very exploitative super structure of capitalist elitism? The secret or the pulse of capitalist exploitative mechanism camouflaged in the nature of alienated labour available in the economy with respect to a certain timing. Labour can be conditioned, the nature of work, duration, ability to bargain, power relations and the level of life threats, with respect to the nature and status of the alienation of labourers. The existing capitalism can be identified as a certain mechanism that creatively does and expands its limits regarding this 'exploitative conditioning'.

### ***Gully-Gold Miners in Colombo: Alienated and Conditioned Labour***

Then the focus of this study turns towards a more subjective (*individual*) aspect in order to examine the nature of alienation in terms of conditioning and exploitation. *Nazzar* (47) is a person who lives in *Hettiweediya* (Chetti

weediya), Colombo, who symbolizes the masked nature of ‘vicious conditioning’ of social life under market capitalism. The term that the researchers were able to craft to name the specific work that *Nazzar* does is

**‘Gully-gold mining’.** Gully-mining is the process which workers are digging for washed-out gold (gold dust) from bigger and well established gold shops and gold craftsmen cottages into sewage pits and gullies in the underground water channels and dissemination mechanism of the Colombo city. The formation of man-made gully-gold mines in Colombo, around Hettiweediya, 7-8 feet underground, was remarkably a historical phenomenon.

There is a comprehensively elegant historical political economic setting behind the establishment of *Chetty* community<sup>6</sup> around this street, how the street became their heartland of trade and commerce, how local people attracted to gold trade, how *Chetty* community happened to represent a certain class structure in the economy - in both pre and post-colonial periods- and how there were number of ‘remnants oriented socio-economic conditionings’<sup>7</sup> occurred and attracted working class citizens from all over the country to this shining economic spot.

In fact, the wasted gold of gold market ‘street monopoly’ have created and economically conditionalized the birth of gully-gold mining workers and the employment culture of mining workers. The marketability of washed-out gold created this occupation in the economy. The people like *Nazzar*, who has been separated from the picture we see as the functioning economy (surface view) are vital not only to understand, mainly dual factors of capitalist economic architecture, conditionality and alienated labour but also to understand the vitality of their labour and its positioning in order to unearth and re-channel remnants of capitalist mode of production back to the same capitalist mode of production.

## Conclusion

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<sup>6</sup> Or Chettiar, derived from the Sanskrit word ‘Shreshti’ means ‘wealth’

<sup>7</sup> Inside the market mechanism there are number of strategic operations (exploitative mechanisms) take place to bring back remnants of one economic activity (if they have a market value) in order to feed another. Consider the shipbreaking industry; with a wider wealth accumulation aspect what it does is that bringing back still-marketable raw materials and equipment under a massive human cost, which cannot be compensated in monetary terms. Consider the gully-gold mining as well, isn’t that a similar case?

Edges of Capitalism argued that what we consider as the edge of the capitalist economy, in both research contexts, is not the real edge or the ending of the labour-capital dichotomy developed through contradictory interests. The two case studies, on Shipbreakers and Gully-gold miners, signify that capitalists encourage the alienated labour in order to restore the 'remnants of capitalist mode of production' while expanding the limits of conditions of labour exploitation. In other words, both case studies demonstrate that, exploitation directly focused on the nature of alienation labourers are trapped in.

The process of exploiting alienated labour in the both contexts reveal that capitalist system, by definition, historically, has been ordered to being exploitative under a huge human cost, which as a process, spatiotemporally continues to be prolonged. The labourers who work under the lethally toxic and dangerous working environment at the shipbreaking yards and people like *Nazzar*, who digs for few ounce of gold, under a shocking working environment, had to accept the market fundamentalism cum vicious conditioning of social life.

Furthermore, the study, argued that in order to understand how contemporary capitalism is truly functioning you have to touch the pulse of labour – capital expression which unendingly make hostile power relations in the society, which our 'market-breed geneticopsycological' perception has been failed to see.

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