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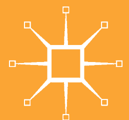
KNOWLEDGE AND THE INDIAN OCEAN

Intangible Networks of Western India and Beyond

Edited by
Sara Keller



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Sara Keller
Editor

Knowledge and the Indian Ocean

Intangible Networks of Western India and Beyond

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Foreword by Hasmukh Shah

Like any Indian entity we too were familiar with mythological stories relating to the seas. The one of the churning of the ocean to settle the rivalry between gods and the powerful elements of the netherworld, *Samudramanthan*, particularly, has been so effectively depicted in an incredibly large bas relief away from India in a forlorn temple area in Sim Riep, Cambodia. But such exposures did not make us wiser about the ocean's breadth, depth, turbulence, deceiving tranquillity or its imagery, metaphor and the underlying MEANING of those stories. Our belief that a series of symposia on the ocean will sensitise people on many and varied aspects of the ocean was, however, vindicated.

What we, in *Darshak Itihas Nidhi* (DIN), learnt was the shallow waters we were wading in; that DIN had a long way to go. On the positive side, however, we had much to show. DIN received encouragement and, indeed, active support of people like Michael Pearson, Lotika Varadarajan, Honor Frost, Sugata Bose, Keki Daruwala and Gulam Mohamed Sheikh. We did not have to struggle much to raise resources to hold 50–125 people in places small and bereft of infrastructure for visitors or an international event at Mandvi and Daman. We received popular support; the society stood by us enabling us to set up an independent Fund, the Maritime History Fund. Our post-symposia volumes provided much needed authenticity to deliberations. Readers found serious scholarship in DIN's publications. More important, our experiment to interact with eminent people from other disciplines in deliberations met with immense success. Thus, we had economists and philologists,

art historians and poets, writers and civil servants as speakers lecturing to and rubbing shoulders with historians. One also saw entrepreneurs and technocrats, college students and graphic designers, descendants of old families preferring to sit unobtrusively interacting with historians in non-formal slots. And, in Bharuch, we had the participation of Indian Navy when Admiral Sunil Lamba, Chief of the Naval Staff of the Indian Navy, spoke as a soldier-scholar making it possible to have deliberations on the surface of the Indian Ocean surrounded by water mass of the Ocean on all sides. That made waves.

Armed with our experience of holding four international symposia we feel we have confidence to revisit the main objectives of DIN, namely stimulating awareness towards history and heritage, supporting historical research and offering a multidisciplinary platform capable of raising issues regarding identity and heritage while continuing our *Samudramanthan*. *Darshak Itihas Nidhi* is a Foundation for Studies and Research in History created 2007 in Gujarat in the footsteps of Darshak. Manubhai Pancholi (1914–2001), better known with his *nom de plume* Darshak, was an eminent intellectual, educationist, social philosopher and commentator and a profound student of world history. The foundation took up the task of publishing books on history in Gujarati and English, it organizes international conferences since 2010.

While DIN will revisit its mandate and re-form its strategy and priorities, one area DIN is better placed than several others is the area of synergy and networking. DIN feels that interdisciplinary studies have not received adequate attention of scholars who work on borders of disciplines. There are yawning knowledge gaps on borders of history on the one hand and anthropology, sociology, genetics, metallurgy, physics, physical geography and a host of disciplines on the other. Climate change for instance has had significant impact on various life forms in the past. It will have much greater impact in the future, more due to and on oceans and equally high on immediate on shore. DIN is currently associating these impacts with an on shore study which might have an impact on the course of history. Similar studies would help historians anticipate and interpret events more precisely. DIN is also engaged in exploring the possibility of such joint study and research with local universities.

Now, a word from a non-historian. Can we not be somewhat more precise in time management? For, at every stage of planning an event till the publication of the post-symposium volume, there are avoidable

delays much to the frustration of sponsors and hosts. It is urgent, to follow the lightening move of our society, and the rash development of projects and studies, to improve the efficiency of our efforts.

Vadodara, India
February 2018

Hasmukh Shah
Chairman, *Darshak Itihas Nidhi*

Hasmukh Shah has had a varied career, beginning as a lecturer in Comparative Religion (1959) and doing research on Gandhi's works. He had senior positions in Government of India, including Finance Ministry, Prime Minister's office and Posts and Telegraph Board. He has been Chairman/Director of over thirty public limited companies. In last two decades, his main preoccupation has been institution building in varied fields such as ecology and environment, education, healthcare and cultural heritage (President of Heritage Trust and Vice Chairman of Indian National for Art and Cultural Heritage). He is Founder Chairman of *Darshak Itihas Nidhi*.

Foreword by Fernando Rosa

It is a great pleasure to write this foreword to a remarkable volume, *Knowledge and the Indian Ocean: Intangible Networks of Western India and Beyond*. Apart from Malaysia and South Africa, besides Australia and Singapore, it is not common to see a scholarly volume coming out of the Indian Ocean region itself, particularly not out of a place, such as Bharuch, which does not have even a fraction of the structure and resources of academia elsewhere. In this case, the vast majority of scholars represented in this volume is also either resident in India, or has had very strong ties to it. Besides, Gujarat and its scholars (many of the latter in fact live in Mumbai) feature prominently in this book. In fact, Western India's uniqueness in the Indian Ocean is highlighted in several chapters. Even a scholar such as Margret Frenz, who is a Goa and Kerala specialist rather than a Gujarat one, stresses in her chapter the singular contribution of Gujaratis in the Indian Ocean (in her case, in colonial British East Africa, though Gujaratis were also prominent in colonial Southern Africa, namely, in Mozambique and South Africa). This strong focus on Western India is not unwarranted, as the various chapters gathered in this volume abundantly show.

Knowledge has closely followed on the footsteps of trade here, and Gujarat has been in this way a unique hub for both through the centuries, a fact that is not often enough taken into consideration in Indian Ocean studies. The fact that Gujarat nowadays, and in colonial times, has not at all held an important place in Indian academia has no doubt greatly contributed to this comparative neglect and invisibility. At best,

as suggested in the title of my joint chapter with Sara Keller, Gujarat has historically been an *académie ambulante*, or "roving academia," i.e. a site of at times very intense, but ultimately little visible, at least outside the region or the gaze of those in the know, scholarly contacts and exchanges. Often, whatever knowledge has come through Western India, has ended up moving on to other locations across the Indian Ocean and the West. This is both to be regretted and unsurprising: as an Indian Ocean and land trade hub, both mobility and change are ingrained in Western India's history, as abundantly shown by evidence presented in several of the papers. Nonetheless, there is in fact much more to this wondrous history than meets the eye here.

Keller sounds a suitable cautionary note in her introduction, when she points out that Gujarat actually possesses very substantial bodies of scholarship, routinely tapped by both local and foreign specialists. That scholarship, except among specialists, has nonetheless often gone under the radar internationally and even inside India. There is no doubt, however, that it has been enormously important, including for understanding larger Indian Ocean histories such as the ones tackled in this volume. One iconic figure here is undoubtedly Makrand Mehta, a senior local scholar who is represented in this book by a short piece on Sufis in Gujarat that allows an attentive reader to suspect great depths of knowledge, a suspicion that is further confirmed by Simpson's indication, in his own chapter, of Mehta's importance, in one way or another, in the fashioning of virtually all historiography related to Gujarat.

Mehta's long and varied career, and many outstanding, widely quoted publications, is in fact emblematic of a relatively common phenomenon across the Indian Ocean (I also know it from Brazil and Turkey), namely, that of local historians who often go under the radar, from the perspective of structured, formal scholarly networks based at prestigious universities in the Anglosphere or outside of it, but whose work is nonetheless fundamental to the very production of the work of scholars more visibly inserted into those networks. Mehta's very presence in this volume is therefore already a strong indication of the book's unique value as a product of deeply rooted historical Indian Ocean knowledge networks. The editor, Sara Keller, is to be congratulated for her ability to act as a savvy go-between in this case. The enticing mix of scholars and scholarship in this volume in this way speaks bookloads about the careful process of nurturing Gujarat-related scholarship through the years, especially that led lately by the foundation which sponsored the event on which

this volume is based, namely, *Darshak Itihas Nidhi*, as Hasmukh Shah's foreword makes clear. Shah himself has clearly been a major figure in this process. It is not irrelevant to point out the incredible personal and collective effort that has gone into bringing about this volume, based on a conference held in Bharuch itself, hardly a place that sees many such events. A local old colonial library—the Raichand Deepchand Library established in 1858—was in fact partly renovated especially for the purpose. As often in Gujarat's histories, extraordinary individuals have been responsible for sudden, important breakthroughs and innovations.

There is therefore nothing linear in the histories recounted in this book. This fact was impressed on me by reading, for instance, Frenz's piece, with its many detailed descriptions of the ups and downs in the trajectories of key Gujarati traders in colonial East Africa, a couple of whom ended their lives in comparative poverty, after having endowed various local institutions, a couple of which subsist to this day. The impressive cross-fertilization across the ages and the Indian Ocean is also a prominent feature of the histories presented in this volume: when T'ang ceramics arrived in the Persian Gulf over a thousand years ago, nobody could have known that, because of contact between China and today's Iraq, Gujarat would become a major innovator and manufacturer in that field, as shown in Nanji's chapter. Even the movement of baobabs across the ocean, highlighted in Bell's and Rangan's joint piece, triggers unexpected results, as when Gujarat cults take on African characteristics. As Helen Basu also shows in her outstanding chapter, in Western India, oceanic and land-based networks in fact meet and cross-fertilize, again in unforeseen ways, often with lasting spiritual consequences. Mehta's piece also indicates how surprising and powerful such cross-fertilization can be. In today's world, riven as it is by increasing religious conflict, it is enormously important to stress how in the past, and even today, Islam, Sufism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and other religions have interacted and changed each other in Western India, often under the aegis of benevolent local sovereigns, as shown in several of the chapters that follow.

This book comes out therefore from the very heart of Western India's long, varied history with the ocean and land. It is also hard not to think that it is in fact also a great tribute to that history.

Parque das Ruínas, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
March 2018

Fernando Rosa
Stellenbosch University

Old Tides and New Waves in Indian Ocean History

Exactly thirty years ago in December 1986, I had organized a conference at Tufts University on the topic *South Asia and World Capitalism*. Our intellectual ambition in those days was to argue that South Asian studies, far from being plain peculiar, could contribute to broader debates and theories. "The area-studies rubric itself," Chris Bayly contended in his essay *Beating the Boundaries*, "tended to emphasize the particular and special in South Asia rather than the comparable and general." He made a strong case for a comparative and connective history of South Asia and the Middle East. In my own contribution, titled "The World Economy and Regional Economies in South Asia," I suggested that "the inter-regional arena might form the intellectual meeting-ground of scholars of 'South Asia' and the 'world'." In attempting to chart a scholarly agenda for the future, I wrote: "It is time for South Asian scholars to break out of the rigid mold set by the area studies rubric and for world-systems analysts to soften and nuance their steely schematic formulations. A via media may be found in the study of comparisons and links underlying inter-regional processes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which operated within a global context and for which South Asia was such a central meeting-point. Imaginative and innovative approaches to this intermediate level of societal interactions and political economies promise to open up an exciting new vista connecting the domain of area studies with the field of global interdisciplinary history."

By the time the book of essays *South Asia and World Capitalism* was published in 1990, this Centre of South Asian and Indian Ocean Studies had already been founded at Tufts the year before. The "and Indian Ocean" in the Centre's title was a deliberate attempt to connect studies of the landmass of the subcontinent to explorations of the oceanic inter-regional arena, long before Indian Ocean studies became fashionable in the North American academy. Faculty positions in South Asian and Indian Ocean history that are so common these days were unheard of in those days.

This outward-looking orientation in the study of South Asia, however, was not easy to achieve. Since the early 1980s, Subaltern Studies had erupted on the South Asian historiographical scene. For all its methodological sophistication, this influential school was more interested in recovering the internal fragments in its missionary zeal to decentre monolithic conceptions of India and South Asia than to cross their external frontiers. Amitav Ghosh's essay on the slave in manuscript H6 was the solitary exception in the first half a dozen volumes of Subaltern Studies to look beyond South Asia's shores. The spirit of intellectual adventure of a few pioneers in time emboldened many more scholars to embark on voyages of discovery of the subcontinent's history that transcended its own boundaries. Indian Ocean studies enabled a creative blend of political economy and culture, and, in hindsight, appears to have let economic history survive and flourish at a time when South Asian studies had taken a sharp literary and cultural turn.

The inter-regional arena of the Indian Ocean has emerged by now as a connected if not unified field of historical study. While the case for integration had been strongly suggested by historical scholarship since the 1980s on the pre-colonial and early modern periods, comparisons and connections across the Indian Ocean in the colonial and modern eras have been a major feature of historical studies in the twenty-first century. Histories of this rich and complex arena of human interaction have taken the form of books, monographs and research articles. These works have explored and explained important historical webs of relationships—social, economic, cultural and political—that bound together the peoples of South Asia, Middle East, East and South Africa, and Southeast and East Asia. In so doing, scholars have transcended rigid area studies boundaries and crossed colonial and national borders in creative ways. While earlier works had focused on trade, newer studies have bridged the gulf between culture and political economy.

The Indian Ocean has been traversed by a number of distinguished historians of the *longue durée*. Their studies of long- and medium-term movements in trade and culture in the Indian Ocean until the eighteenth century reveal a picture of a well-integrated inter-regional arena of economic and cultural interaction and exchange. Particularly important connections of material life, politico-military organization, economic institutions and social-religious ideology were forged across the Ocean during the millennium that stretched from the eighth to the eighteenth century. The modification of these links in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century critically influenced the nature of the colonial transition in South and Southeast Asia and European ascendancy in the Middle East. The historiographies of the decline of the great Ottoman and Mughal empires and of the conditioning of the European colonial impact by the dynamics of indigenous identities and institutions of Indo-Islamic society are examples of the merging strands of South Asian, Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern scholarship.

Indian Ocean historians, so adept at defying the constraints of spatial boundaries, had been, by and large, remarkably diffident until recently about crossing the great temporal divide of the eighteenth century. Confident assertions were made about the decisive end of a millennium in Indian Ocean history with the onset of European imperial domination. Yet, paradoxically, the abandonment by most historians of the Indian Ocean as an inter-regional arena of analysis on the assumption that its organic unity had been sundered made it especially difficult to ferret out the key elements of change during the transition to colonialism. Recent books published within the last decade have underscored the resilience and relevance of an inter-regional space in modern times. My own book, *A Hundred Horizons*, came out in 2006 and has been followed by a new wave of scholarship on modern Indian Ocean history. The Indian Ocean was characterized in the era of modern colonial empires by inter-regional specialization based on flows of capital, labour, resources, skills, ideas and culture. Inter-regional networks were utilized, moulded, reordered and rendered subservient by Western capital and the more powerful colonial states, but never torn apart until these came under severe strain during the 1930s depression. Anti-colonial movements crossed colonial borders to forge larger political solidarities. Links that were ruptured during the heyday of post-colonial nation-states between the 1940s and the 1980s are being partially restored in the last two decades. The Indian Ocean as an inter-regional arena continues to

be vibrant in the contemporary phase of globalization. Indian Ocean historians have been contributing to a more nuanced understanding of global history while offering a critique of the easy folding of inter-regional ties into the concept of the global. They have also refused to be mired in the local, pointing instead to the ways in which "fragments" connected to one another at the inter-regional level. Indian Ocean historiography is at the cutting edge of sophisticated new methods of analysis and arguably more sophisticated than comparable historiographies of the Mediterranean, Atlantic and Pacific worlds.

I am pleased to see that the contributors to this volume are drawn from multiple generations of scholars who have made original contributions to research in this field. They come from different parts of India and the world to facilitate a truly transnational and global conversation. I had set sail on my intellectual voyage in search of the hundred horizons of the Indian Ocean from the shores of South Asia. We should, of course, guard against the risk of subcontinent-centrism, but at the same time, we are learning more here about Gujarat's articulation with the world of the Indian Ocean or, in other words, the links between a region and an inter-regional arena. The contributions feature expertise that ranges from the Arab world to China, Southeast Asia to South Africa, from trade to religion, migration to literature. Much like the Indian Ocean itself, this volume can be seen as an arena of interaction. It will certainly make Indian Ocean history attractive and enticing for readers in the future. Let us see if together we can reveal a kaleidoscope of patterns that emerged historically over time across the expansive Indian Ocean space.

Our present location by the sea should not make us forget that the influence of oceans has never been limited to the lands that abut them. "Mediterranean civilization," Fernand Braudel observed, "spreads far beyond its shores in great waves that are balanced by continual returns… We should imagine a hundred frontiers, not one, some political, some economic, and some cultural." Tracing the connections between Europe and the Mediterranean, he pointed to "a series of north-south routes, natural isthmuses that are still decisive influences on exchanges today: the Russian isthmus, the Polish isthmus, the German isthmus and the French isthmus." These represented "four skeins of history, each tied more or less securely to the warm sea, the source of prosperity, but also linked to each other" (Braudel 1995, pp. 170, 188–189, 191).

Historians exploring the ties between the South Asian subcontinent and the Indian Ocean in the early modern and modern periods have paid a great deal of attention to the ports and emporia that have dotted its coasts and littoral zones. There is an impressive body of scholarship on trade and culture in cosmopolitan port cities, such as, Bharuch, Khambhat, Surat and Bombay in different eras.[1] Yet, to unveil a hundred horizons of the Indian Ocean in all its hues, it is necessary to navigate the great rivers that link the mountains to the seas.[2] The river routes of South Asia supplied the warp and woof that tied the continent to the ocean much in the same way as the land isthmuses of Europe.

The ports that have been the focal point of scholarly attention were doubtless venues for the expression of various forms of cosmopolitanism. I would like scholars of Bharuch to tell us more about the connections between the hinterland of the Narmada valley and the Arabian Sea. Let me share with you some thoughts from a project I am currently engaged in with the collaboration of Ayesha Jalal and Kris Manjapra on the articulation of the delta of the Ganga and the valley of the Indus to the Indian Ocean inter-regional area in the modern era—a topic that merits a more detailed and textured study.

Rivers and Seas

The Indus and the Ganga had nurtured cultures and polities for several millennia. For our present purposes, it is sufficient to begin with the discovery of these riverine tracts by the vanguards of Britain's seaborne empire. James Rennell, a renowned late eighteenth-century imperial cartographer, found the Ganga and Brahmaputra (or the "Ganges" and "Burrampooter" as he called them) intersecting "the country of Bengal" in such a way as to form "the most complete and easy inland navigation that can be conceived." In most parts of the country, a navigable stream could be found within a maximum range of twenty-five miles. This river navigation gave "constant employment to 30,000 boatmen" ferrying the salt and food for ten million people and transporting commercial exports

[1] See, for example, Chaudhuri (1985), Dasgupta (1994), Green (2011).

[2] For a discussion of space and time in the Indian Ocean inter-regional arena, see Bose (2006), pp. 1–35.

and imports amounting to perhaps two million pounds sterling every year in the immediate aftermath of the British conquest of Bengal. The boats could be as large as 180 tons, but more commonly had a capacity of 30–50 tons. Rennell regarded the Ganga and the Brahmaputa as "twin sisters, from the contiguity of their springs" in the Himalayas, one moving west and the other east. They resembled each other not just in length and volume but also "the smoothness and colors of their waters," "the appearance of their borders and islands," and "the height to which their floods rise with the periodic rains." The Ganga traversed mountainous paths for 750 miles to Hardwar where gushing "through an opening in the mountains" it flowed with "a smooth navigable stream through delightful plains" to the sea some 1350 miles away. From a military perspective, Rennell thought it "infinitely surpass[ed] the celebrated inland navigation of North America." In its journey through the plains, it received eleven rivers, some of which were "equal to the Rhine and none smaller than the Thames." The delta bordering on the sea was "a labyrinth of rivers and creeks," the Sunderbans. It was "enveloped in woods and infested with Tygers" (Rennell 1780, pp. 3–8).

The river and the sea were bound in an intimate relationship. The water of the Ganga taken at its height contained a quarter portion of mud. "No wonder then," Rennell commented, "that the subsiding waters should quickly form a stratum of earth; or that the Delta should encroach upon the sea." The ocean in its turn exercised its dominion in the winter and the monsoon in two very different ways: "in the one by the ebbing and flowing of tides; and in the other by depressing the periodic flood, till the surface of it coincides as nearly with its own, as the descent of the channel of the river will admit" (Rennell 1780, pp. 18, 25).

The Ganga was well known to European travellers for centuries. However, the Brahmaputra was unknown in Europe as late as 1765, the year the East India Company obtained the *diwani* or the right to collect the revenue of Bengal. The twin sisters, separated at birth in westerly and easterly directions, startlingly subverted the saying that the twain shall never meet. Some 200 miles from Yunnan, the Brahmaputra hesitated. "Here it appears," Rennell wrote in 1780, "as if undetermined whether to attempt a passage to the sea by the Gulf of Siam, or by that of Bengal; but seemingly determining on the latter, it turns suddenly to the west through Assam, and enters Bengal on the north-east." Throughout its course of 400 miles through Bengal, the Brahmaputra bore an intimate resemblance to the Ganga, "except in one particular." The exception was

this: for the last sixty miles before it met the Ganga, "it forms a stream which is regularly from four to five miles wide, and but for its freshness might pass for an arm of the sea." To capture "the grandeur of this magnificent object," Rennell had to take recourse to poetry:

> Scarce the muse
> Dares stretch her wing o'er the enormous mass
> Of rushing water; to whole dread expanse.
> Continuous depth, and wond'rous length of course.
> Our floods are rills –
> Thus pouring on, it proudly seeks the deep,
> Whose vanquish'd tide, recoiling from the shock
> Yields to this liquid weight. – Thomson's Seasons.
> (Rennell 1780, pp. 27–28)

It was this watery landscape that was home to the peasantry of Bengal.

Contrary to the claims of Braudel and the Annales school of historians, geographic structures are not constants. The transience of the physical environment is nowhere more evident than in the deltas of great rivers (Bose 1993, pp. 9–14). "Next to earthquakes," Rennell correctly noted, "perhaps the floods of the tropical rivers produce the quickest alterations in the face of our globe." (Rennell 1780, p. 16). What Rennell's 1780 snapshot could not capture was the steady swing of the active delta towards the east over three centuries. The Bhagirathi in the west had given way to the Padma in the east as the main channel of the Ganga as it wove its way towards the sea. Nor could Rennell anticipate catalytic events that would change the identity of rivers. The great flood of 1787 resulted in the Tista, formerly a tributary of the Ganga, to link up with the Brahmaputra, which shifted westwards to meet the Ganga near Goalundo in Dhaka district via the Jamuna. The waters of the twin sisters merged to flow into the Meghna near Chandpur in Tippera district. East Bengal's agrarian identity would henceforth be inextricably linked to the strains of the boatmen's music that wafted across the Padma and Meghna (Bose 1993, pp. 11–12).

The process of Britain's colonial conquest of India that began in Bengal took nearly a century for its completion. Gujarat was taken by the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was only in the 1830s that the British began to take an interest in navigating the Indus as a prelude to their conquest of Sindh and Punjab (Andrew 1857). Lahore, the capital

of Punjab, was located on the banks of the Ravi. “There is an uninterrupted navigation of the Indus from the sea to Lahore,” Alexander Burnes wrote in his geographical memoir of 1833, “and the distance, by course of the river, amounts to about a thousand British miles.” The journey by river to Lahore took exactly sixty days. Multan was reached in forty, but another twenty days were spent “in navigating the Ravee, which is a most crooked river.” Lahore had an estimated population of some 80,000 citizens, even though it was smaller at that time than its sister city Amritsar. There were about seven hundred boats between the sea and Lahore deployed for ferrying and other purposes. Despite this evidence of a thriving inland navigation, Burnes insisted that there were political problems in using the Indus as a channel of commerce. The people and princes, in his view, were “ignorant and barbarous.”[3]

The Indus bifurcated into two branches five miles below the city of Thatta and sixty miles from the sea. They flowed into the ocean seventy miles apart and this distance constituted the span of the active delta of the Indus. If one included other moribund branches, the delta had a width of about 125 miles. Rice was the staple product of the Indus delta even though wheat was preferred in certain localities. Grain was “cheap and plentiful” everywhere and Thatta and Hyderabad, situated three miles away from the Indus, were the ancient and modern capitals, respectively. Karachi (or as Burnes spelled it, Curachee) was situated fourteen miles from the western mouth of the Indus. This port handled most of the imports as well as the most valuable export, Malwa opium. The local chiefs imposed a duty of 250 rupees on each camel load of opium and the revenue from opium had amounted to 700,000 rupees, equal to the land revenue of the Talpur Mirs of Sind. The emirate had about a hundred dinghies or sea-vessels “of a peculiar construction, sharp-built, with a very lofty poop.” The smaller boats navigated the river and were used for fishing in the estuary while the larger ones sailed from Karachi to Muscat, Bombay and the Malabar Coast. They were purely trading vessels and carried no guns. Connected on the one side to the inter-regional arena of the Indian Ocean, the region was also linked to an overland network of trade. Hindus of Bahawalpur travelled to Balkh, Bukhara and Astrakhan by way of Peshawar, Kabul and Bamiyan to carry

[3] Burnes (1833: Read 25th March, 8th and 22nd April, 13th and 27th May, 1833, pp. 113–114, 155).

on commerce with central Asia. The Indus was as closely related to the Arabian Sea as the Ganga was to the Bay of Bengal. It was clear to Burnes that the land in the deltaic tract of the Indus "must have greatly encroached on the ocean." "Nothing is more corroborative of this fact," he wrote, "than the shallowness of the sea out from the mouths of the Indus, and the clayey bottom and tinge of the water."[4]

Alexander Burnes had a certain obsession with Alexander the Great's adventures in the Indus valley. This is quite understandable as the British prepared for the military conquest of Sindh and Punjab. He noted that Punjab's military resources were "immense." Looking into the future, he reckoned there were "few rivers of the world where steam might be used with better effect than the Indus," dramatically reducing the duration of the voyage between Lahore and the sea.[5] Charles Napier, who led the British conquest of Sind, wrote in 1842 about the need to abolish river tolls on the Indus, turn Karachi into a free port, protect the traders of Shikarpur, make Sukkur a marketing hub, and introduce steamboats for river navigation. Calcutta, Napier complained, was trying to run down Sindh and the Indus because they threatened the trade of the Ganga and give an advantage to Bombay and Karachi. Once the conquest of both Sindh and Punjab had been accomplished by 1849, Napier exulted: "India should suck English manufactures up her great rivers, and pour down those rivers her own varied products. Kurrachee, you will yet be the glory of the East! Would that I could come alive again to see you, Kurrachee, in your grandeur." (Andrew 1976, pp. 6–9). Napier's dream of the imperial economic penetration of India up its river valleys came true. However, in one technological aspect, the conquest of the classic river, the Indus, proved to be something of an anti-climax. Steamships on the Indus proved to be spectacular failures in both the economic and strategic dimensions. By contrast, country boats decisively won the contest with steam flotillas in carrying crops, commodities and soldiers across the Sindh-Punjab frontier.[6]

The term Sindhu from which both the region of Sindh and the river Indus took their name was synonymous with the sea. Punjab was, of course, the land of the five rivers—Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas and

[4] Burnes (1833, pp. 114–115, 121, 123, 126–127, 142–144).

[5] Burnes (1833, pp. 113, 154).

[6] For an engaging account of "conquering the classic river", see Albina (2008, pp. 26–51); on the resilience of traditional country boats in the age of steam, see Dewy (2014).

Sutlej—all tributaries of the Sindhu or Indus. Together, they formed the western expanse of the Indo-Gangetic plains. The Sutlej-Beas doab, the valley encompassing the easternmost rivers of Punjab, was not so far from the Ganga-Jamuna doab in the vicinity of Delhi. The Ganga and Brahmaputra, as we have seen, had their reunion in eastern Bengal. Having proximate origins in the Himalayan mountain ranges, the Indus, Ganga and Brahmaputra river-systems watered the world's largest contiguous stretch of alluvium. The skeins of history, economic and cultural, connecting this landmass to the ocean called *al-Bahr al-Hind* deserve a closer analysis than they have received so far from historians of South Asia and the Indian Ocean.

Islam is the Ocean

"Islam is the desert," Braudel proclaimed, echoing Essad Bey.[7] This was to confuse the place of origin of the revelation, Ayesha Jalal has argued, with the character of the religion and its associated way of life. She makes a counter-claim: "Islam is the ocean." Islam travelled well by sea on boats and ships, and not just by caravans. It did not arrive fully formed in the South Asian subcontinent, but rather was shaped by the river valleys and agricultural plains where it attracted the largest numbers of the Faithful. It established an urban presence too on the coasts and the interior. The entanglement of Islam with the agrarian environment of reclamation and cultivation in Bengal as well as varied urban settings of rulership, trade and bazaars in the Gangetic plain has been well studied by historians of the late medieval and early modern periods.[8] Placing Islam in its Indian Ocean context promises to offer fresh perspectives on its modern history in the age of European empire.

The search for cosmopolitanism by historians has been often confined to the pre-modern and pre-colonial era based on a false assumption of its antithetical relationship with modern anti-colonial nationalism. Cosmopolitanism across the Indian Ocean did, of course, have pre-modern and early modern roots. Bombay and Calcutta were latecomers in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to that cosmopolitan world of port cities of which Bharuch, Khambhat and Surat had been shining examples.

[7] Braudel (1995, p. 187).

[8] See, for instance, Roy (1983), Eaton (1993).

During the millennium stretching from the eighth to the eighteenth century, Islam or a Muslim ecumene had signified cosmopolitanism across that wide realm. From the early eighteenth century Parsis and then Gujarati Banias contributed to what Christopher Bayly has described as "a culture of cosmopolitan commercial sociability." The Parsi diaspora throughout western India, first in Surat and later in Bombay "adapted their form of local assemblies and created their own modernized form of the Indian panchayat." Their early modern bulletins of commercial intelligence were the harbingers of modern newspapers. The Parsis were not alone in breathing new life into early Asian modernity. A wide range of Shia sects in Bombay with a history of pre-colonial links across the western Indian Ocean—Bohras, Khojas, Memons and Ismailis—adjusted their habits of commercial cosmopolitanism to the exigencies of a colonial transition. A medieval Ismaili text, popular in nineteenth-century Bombay, described the perfect human being in the following terms: "Persian by breeding, Arabian by faith, Iraqi in culture, Hebrew in law, Christian in manner, Syrian in devotion, Greek in science, Indian in discernment, Sufi in intimations" (Bayly 2012).

Calcutta and Bombay rose to a position of pre-eminence, if not dominance, as colonial port cities in the world of Indian Ocean politics and commerce from the second decade of the nineteenth century. In a recent book, Nile Green has explored the Muslim experience with industrial modernity in Bombay between 1840 and 1915. Green seems to be in two minds as to whether *Bombay Islam* was cosmopolitan or not. The book opens dramatically with the collapse of a block of the Sita Ram Building in 1903, a disaster that was rumoured to have been retribution for an insult offered by its Hindu owner and British customers at a bar on its ground floor to the shrine across the street of a saint named Pedro Shah, a Portuguese sailor who had converted to Islam. Green interprets "his spectacular miracle" as "symptomatic of the larger pressures of cosmopolitan modernity that helped create a marketplace for religions in the city surrounding them." Bombay is seen to have emerged as "the cosmopolis of the Indian Ocean." Muslim writings in trans-regional languages, such as, Persian, Urdu and Arabic circulated across the western Indian Ocean as far as South Africa. These are analysed to explore what is described as "an industrial and cosmopolitan environment." Yet, in summarizing his argument, Green takes a contradictory position. "In the most industrialized, technological and cosmopolitan city of the west Indian Ocean," he asserts, "the most successful religious

productions were not 'modern,' disenchanted 'Protestant' Islams, but cults that were enchanted, hierarchical and ritualistic. They were neither uniform in characteristics nor cosmopolitan in outlook, but highly differentiated and parochially communitarian. They were neither reformed, nor modernist, but customary and traditionalist." The deployment of the market model of a religious economy leads to a second contradiction. Muslims are said to have consumed the "Islamic products and services" on offer as "rational agents" (Green 2011, pp. 1–3, 11, 16). That seems to toss the enchanting quality of Bombay Islams into the Arabian Sea.

An eagerness to contest Christopher Bayly's thesis about the rise of the global uniformity of world religions in the course of the nineteenth century (Bayly 2004) has led Green to exaggerate diversity and diversification. We need a better conceptual framework to make sense of the religious experience of subaltern groups in conditions of urban industrial modernity. Instead of drawing a sharp dichotomy between the one and the many, reformist versus customary Islam, modernity against tradition, a subtler approach would be to accept the interplay of the singular and the plural and the many accommodations between the supposedly reformist and customary strands of Islam. Muslim shrines drew large numbers of non-Muslim devotees, as in the case of the shrine of Haji Ali in Bombay and Moula Ali Shah in Calcutta. The Haji Ali shrine on Bombay's sea face was constructed in memory of a wealthy Bukhara merchant who gave up his worldly possessions to go for haj. The relevance of the Indian Ocean inter-regional space in modern times was underscored by the reconstruction of the Nakhoda Mosque in Calcutta under the patronage of the Kachchhi Memons in 1926. Cosmopolitanism must not be confused with global uniformity. It may be possible to delineate the features of "local cosmopolitanism" emanating from Bombay into the Indian Ocean inter-regional arena, much in the way that Engseng Ho has narrated so astutely in his book *The Graves of Tarim* (Ho 2006; Bhabha 2004). Bombay also served as a magnet for Muslims from across the subcontinent. For all their differences, they embarked as Muslims for pilgrimages from this port city. From the late 1860s to the 1890s, the haj from India consisted of carefully controlled flows of pilgrims from the three ports of Calcutta, Bombay and Karachi. The outbreak of plague in 1896 led to the closure of Calcutta as a pilgrim port for thirty years. Even after the port of Calcutta was reopened for pilgrim traffic in 1926, a majority of pilgrims from Bengal continued to embark from Bombay

and as many as 85% chose to return via Bombay. The convening power of this metropolis for the subcontinent's Muslims was formidable.

Nile Green "deliberately stops" his survey of Bombay Islam in 1915 on grounds that Mohammad Ali Jinnah became the President of the All India Muslim League the previous year. "From that period," it is claimed, "the new imperatives of nationalism and the search for a unified Indian Muslim 'community' symbolized by Jinnah pulled Bombay's Muslims in other directions, whether seen in their participation in the nationalism of the Muslim League or the internationalism of the Khilafat movement." (Green 2011, p. 237). Yet, the years 1910s to the 1940s represent the most fascinating phase in the history of aspirational cosmopolitanism in South Asia, a kind of cosmopolitanism that was bound in a complex relationship with Indian nationalism and Islamic universalism.[9]

The colonial port-cities were by no means the only or even chief conduits of South Asian Islam's engagements with the wider Indian Ocean inter-regional arena in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Sunil Amrith's book *Crossing the Bay of Bengal* on Tamil migration, a relatively small coastal town of Nagore emerges as the nodal point of the diffusion of a cosmopolitanism of the Tamil Muslim assortment across the eastern Indian Ocean. The spiritual centre is the Sufi mystic Shahul Hamid's *dargah* or shrine, replicas of which can be found in Singapore and Penang. "Shahul Hamid," Amrith tells us in a forthcoming essay, "was an apt patron saint for people on the move. The sea is at the heart of his story. Stories of his life recount his journey from the plains of North India to Mecca and back across the Indian Ocean, stopping in the Maldives and at Adam's Peak in Ceylon before settling in Nagore, where he died." In his comparative and connected history of Tamil Muslims and Chinese Muslims in Southeast Asia, Amrith gives us a vivid account of "a lived and pragmatic cosmopolitanism" rooted in particular urban contexts. His survey over the *longue durée* enables him to distinguish this modern instance of cosmopolitan practice from the romanticized versions propagated by some historians of the pre-modern era. At the same time, he is able to track its long after-life through the period

[9] This section on Bombay draws on arguments in Sugata Bose's Vasant J. Sheth Lecture on "Colorful Cosmopolitanisms: Bombay, Calcutta and the Indian Ocean", January 2013.

of anti-colonial nationalism and beyond the attempted closure of the ocean's call by the guardians of the post-colonial nation-states' borders.

Migrant capital and labour undergirded the political economy of European colonial empires. Yet, the monitoring of mobility was simultaneously a key imperial project. The movement that was brought under strict surveillance was Muslim pilgrimage across the Indian Ocean, especially the annual haj. Eric Tagliacozzo's book *The Longest Journey* shows how the imperial control of Muslim bodies evolved from ad hoc methods of regulation to a systematic and rigorous espionage that may be seen as the defining feature of the high modernist state by the early twentieth century. Tagliacozzo sees the French, British, Dutch and Italian projects of surveillance on Muslims in the Hejaz through a comparative lens. In time, the British apparatus of colonial control became the most elaborate and formidable in the partnership inflected with rivalry that sought to parry the threat of "pan-Islam" and other allied transnational anti-colonialisms. "Pan-Islamism" was a pejorative colonial label for a phenomenon that is better described as a quest for Islamic universalism. The haj was one avenue of that search. The pilgrims' progress was strictly monitored by colonial rules.[10]

While Tagliacozzo provides an incisive analysis of European visions of control, Seema Alavi's recent book evokes expressions of a *Muslim Cosmopolitanism* in the interstices of the Ottoman and British empires during the late nineteenth century. She does so by following the itineraries and sifting through the textual productions of five Muslim men of religion, who fled India after the British crushed the 1857 rebellion. As long as the Ottoman Empire supplied an alternative locus of temporal sovereignty,[11] these *émigré*-s had a space where they could articulate a global Muslim sensibility. Alavi sees this form of cosmopolitanism between empires as a challenge to the emerging power of the nation and a precursor to the idea of transnationalism in the twentieth century. Sayyid Ahmad Khan's voyage to the Hejaz on board the *Baroda* in 1869 and Maulana Shibli Numani's journey to the Ottoman domains in 1892 would take the expansive spatial imagination of a transnational Muslim world to a higher intellectual plane.

[10] On the *haj* from India, see Bose (2006, chapter 6).

[11] For a discussion on different realms of divine and temporal sovereignty in Muslim thought, see Jalal (2000).

Sana Aiyar in her book *Indians in Kenya* shows the relevance of the Indian Ocean inter-regional arena as a horizon from which to illuminate local histories in a transnational, connective context. She analyses the early twentieth-century anti-colonial movements in Kenya where Africans and Indians were partners and rivals. Extra-territorial solidarity based on religious identity linked the Khilafat movement in India to the politics of Indian trading classes in East Africa. The affinities and animosities based on race complicated faith-based relations. Moreover, there were tensions between discourses of indigeneity and diaspora in Africa that caution against any uncritical celebration of expressions of cosmopolitanism transcending the identities of race and religion.

While Amrith, Tagliacozzo, Alavi and Aiyar pursue connections across the vast eastern and western zones of the Indian Ocean, Iftekhar Iqbal focuses on Bengal or the Ganga-Brahmaputra deltaic tract and its articulation with broader Indian Ocean and global domains. These new contributions must be placed in the larger context of a development of immense significance for the nineteenth-century world economy going on in the agrarian hinterlands of Asia. What was fashioned in the first half of the nineteenth century was a settled and sedentarised peasantry, which during its latter half produced primary products for a capitalist world market. Production relations based on settled peasant labour and migrant indentured or quasi-indentured labour came to be bound in a dialectical relationship. It may have been possible until the mid-nineteenth century to advance a simple demographic typology in the eastern Indian Ocean of densely populated and sparsely populated zones. The rise of plantations and mines dramatically unsettled that dichotomy. They drew their labour from the old-settled thickly populated agrarian regions, which got an extended lease of life through this escape-hatch of migration. Large contingents of Tamil labour, for instance, moved to the tea plantations of Ceylon and the rubber plantations of Malaya, just as Chinese migrant labourers were set to work in the tin mines of the peninsula. But the new concentrations of population also needed new sources of food, which the old rice bowls of Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Java and northern Vietnam were in no position to supply. This spurred the opening of the rice frontiers of the Irrawady delta in Lower Burma, the Chao Phraya delta in Thailand, and the Mekong delta in southern Vietnam largely financed by overseas Chinese and Indian capitalists. The triad of old agrarian zones, new plantations and mines, and newer rice frontiers linked by specialized flows of labour and capital remained in

place from the mid-nineteenth century until the crisis of the depression decade arrested or reversed most of these flows (Bose 2006, chapter 3). If Tamil peasant labour moved across the sea to Ceylon and Malaya, Bengali peasant labour in the densely populated east Bengal districts adopted two strategies of survival. First, Bengal's smallholding peasantry turned to cultivating a more labour-intensive and higher value cash crop, jute, in a process that could be termed agricultural involution. Second, a certain sizeable fraction among them migrated to the Brahmaputra valley in the neighbouring province of Assam. Nearly a million Bengali Muslim peasants went in search of jute lands from eastern Bengal to Assam in the first three decades of the twentieth century (Bose 1986, pp. 37–58; 1993, pp. 24–29).

Iftekhar Iqbal views Bengal as a frontier of both the Indian Ocean and the South Asian landmass. Paralleling Amrith's tracking of Tamil migration, Iqbal examines the mobility of Bengalis along the rim of the Bay of Bengal. Adapting and modifying Nile Green's analysis of "space making," Iqbal demonstrates how Bengali agrarian society was deeply influenced by the promises and predicaments of the Indian Ocean. Conversely, he also views the Indian Ocean from the vantage point of the river or rather the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta of Bengal as well as the Irrawady delta in Burma. If Rennell was interested merely in the geographical and commercial confluence of the river and the ocean, Iqbal studies trade and religion, culture and politics, at the cusp of the delta and the bay. The history of Bengalis, subalterns and elites alike, was not contained within the borders of Bengal in the age of British colonialism. The Bengali language, far from being confined to the level of a vernacular, rose as the vehicle of a universalist aspiration, not just in contestation with Urdu but through a partnership marked by rivalry with Arabic.

As we all know, the partition of Punjab and Bengal in 1947 split up of the river basins of the Indus and the Ganga in 1947. Rammanohar Lohia recalls a private conversation in Noakhali with Nehru at the instance of Mahatma Gandhi in November 1946. "Mr. Nehru spoke of the water, slime, bush and tree," Lohia writes, "that he found everywhere in East Bengal. He said that was not the India he or I knew and wanted with some vehemence to cut East Bengal away from the main land of India." Lohia found this to be an extraordinary observation. "These reasons of geography might under other circumstances," Lohia commented, "prove how necessary it is for the Ganga and Jamuna plains to stay joined with their luxuriant terminus. But once the idea of partition came

to be accepted as a condition precedent to India's freedom, no matter that the acceptance was still very private and not even communicated to Mahatma Gandhi, the geography of East Bengal could well become abominable."[12] The division of land and water destroyed the organic river isthmuses that connected Punjab and Bengal to the Indian Ocean. It was a crime against nature and humanity for which the subcontinent is still paying a hefty price.

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[12] Lohia (1960, p. 17).

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