

International Seminar

Tides of Connections and Tensions

Revisiting the Indian Ocean and Red Sea
as Spaces of Historical Entanglement

5 - 6 February, 2026
Online

Booklet

Themes and scope

The Indian Ocean and the Red Sea have long been dynamic spaces of exchange, conflict and cultural integration, where empires, merchants, migrants and ideas have converged and clashed. This international seminar seeks to interrogate these maritime regions as active agents in shaping local, regional, and global histories, and challenges traditional narratives by foregrounding connectivity, friction, and durability across time and space.

The seminar argues that the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea should be understood not merely as arenas of contemporary geopolitical competition, but as spaces where long-standing maritime traditions and patterns of connectivity are re-emerging. It explores how these renewed forms of thalassocracy unfold within radically transformed geopolitical contexts, challenging conventional notions of maritime sovereignty and calling for new analytical frameworks to understand oceanic governance today.

The papers presented in the seminar reflect a wide range of disciplinary perspectives, including history, political science, and the social sciences, and engage scholars at different career stages. Particular attention is given to contributions by PhD candidates and early career researchers, with a notable presence of scholars working on or from the Indian Ocean and Red Sea regions.

The seminar brings together works-in-progress and fosters an open, collaborative discussion format. The panels prioritize original, unpublished work, encouraging the presentation of emerging research agendas and innovative approaches.

PANEL 1: TALES OF NETWORKS AND ENCOUNTERS

Chair: Sara Zanotta - University of Turin

Jenia Mukherjee, Agrima Mishra - Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur

Environmental Archive of Myth and Memory: Early Modern (More-than-human) Histories from the Mouth of the Bay of Bengal

This paper examines Sundarbans folk-literary sources as vernacular archives for reconstructing the history of the early modern Bengal delta. Geographically, the Sundarbans occupy the southwestern rim of the Bay of Bengal, where the Ganges–Brahmaputra–Meghna basin meets the sea. Yet, while the Bay was a crucial fluvial-maritime nodal point in the early modern Indian Ocean world, it has remained marginal within oceanic historiography, usually dominated by Atlantic and Pacific paradigms, with notable exceptions such as Rila Mukherjee's *Pelagic Passageways* (2011) and Sunil Amrith's *Crossing the Bay of Bengal* (2013), which reposition the Bay within precolonial circulations and modern migration histories. Intervening in this historiographical lacuna, the paper reads seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Sundarbans folk-religious storyworlds as a syncretic archive of ecological agency and ethical articulation. Distinct Bengali genres –the maṅgal-kāvya (devotional verse) and the pīr-kathā (Sufi tales of saints)— intersect here, as in the Bonbibī Jahurānāmā (c. 1877), which adopts the Persian nāma form in Bengali verse, and Kṛṣṇarām Dās's Rāy Maṅgal (c. 1686), where optical tropes (floating citadels, disappearing silted islands) evoke the eroding nature of alluvial deltaic geography.

Drawing on Tony K. Stewart's *Needle at the Bottom of the Sea* (2024), which highlights the delta as a storied worlding, the paper reads early modern Bengali vernacular narratives as 'fluid' archives that advance Sundarbans' more-than-human history by showcasing the multiple water-land interrelations, sedimentary processes, and mangrove ecologies that co-produce interstitial spaces in which human and non-human histories are intrinsically entangled. Methodologically, it re-situates the environmental archive through an eco-ethnographic approach that bridges ecocritical analysis and environmental history. Thereby, comprehending local cosmologies as more-than-folklore, and re-understanding them as historically situated practices of environmental witnessing. In this context, the vernacular tales from Āthārobhāṭī, the "land of eighteen tides", or the Sundarbans, are examined as narratives of collective memory and relational observation that emerge from volatile lifeworlds shaped by monsoons, floods, and sediment flows, alongside the everyday dangers of inhabiting shared spaces with tigers, serpents, and crocodiles. Situated within Environmental Humanities, this paper reframes a more-than-human longue durée of Indian Ocean environmental history by re-contextualising the Indian Ocean as a historical act that materialises its agency through the sedimentary fluidscape of the Sundarbans.

PANEL 1: TALES OF NETWORKS AND ENCOUNTERS

Chair: Sara Zanotta - University of Turin

Marcella Simoni - Ca' Foscari University of Venice, NYU Florence, European University Institute
Ink, Identity, and Exchange: Jewish Presses Bridging the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean 1880s-1940s

This paper examines the transnational encounters of Jews situated between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, broadly conceived, as reflected in - and simultaneously shaped by - local Jewish presses from the 1880s to the early 1940s. The term “local Jewish press” refers here to three Jewish periodicals that serve as the primary sources for this study: the Bombay-based *The Bene Israelite*, the Shanghai-based *Israel's Messenger*, and the Singapore-based *The Israelite*.

The contribution addresses three transformative dimensions of this transnational experience, focusing on identity, class, and memory. With respect to identity, it traces the evolution of Jewish self-representation among communities located between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, with particular attention to Baghdadi Jews. This analysis explores questions of religious observance, modes of self-representation, and the positioning of this community within the broader Sephardic sphere - linking a longstanding Babylonian heritage to a partially imagined Mediterranean or Spanish past - as well as interactions with other local Jewish groups, such as the Bene Israel.

From a class perspective, the paper investigates changing patterns and standards of consumption within these communities, especially in relation to the emergence of new middle classes. Advertising materials in the selected periodicals provide a revealing lens onto the shifting social composition of Jewish communities in Bombay, Shanghai, and Singapore. Finally, in addressing collective memory, the study analyzes obituaries as a literary genre that maps the transnational trajectories of Jews across these regions. Such texts connect sites of residence, education, and labor, contributing to the construction of a narrative of a society that understood and represented itself as dispersed across multiple geographies linking the Mediterranean with South, East, and Southeast Asia.



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PANEL 1: TALES OF NETWORKS AND ENCOUNTERS

Chair: Sara Zanotta - University of Turin

Samuel Emaha Tsegai - Queen's University

Indigenous Merchant Cartographers and European Geographers: Trade Routes and Making and Circulation of Geographical Knowledge in the 19th Century Ethiopia

After nearly half a century of decline, the Red Sea trade underwent a revival in the 1830s and 1840s. As a result, long-distance trade connecting Abyssinia to the rich and diverse territories to its south was reactivated and re-articulated to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trades despite the fact that the Abyssinian state was still beset by centrifugal forces vying for hegemony.

The trade circuits were not only conduits for commodity and enslaved labour circulation, but they also served as vital nodes and networks of geographical knowledge production and circulation. This paper sheds light on how trade routes within Abyssinia and in the broader region served as spaces of geographical and cartographic knowledge production, circulation and consumption in the 19th century, and on the role indigenous merchants played in the European mapping of Abyssinia and its surrounding territories. It constructs the stories of two indigenous Abyssinian merchants who co-created maps of the region in collaboration with European travellers and geographers.

PANEL 1: TALES OF NETWORKS AND ENCOUNTERS

Chair: Sara Zanotta - University of Turin

Debalina Das - Central University of Kashmir

Post-Maritime Consciousness and the Afterlife of Red Sea Legacies in Leila Aboulela's "Coloured Lights"

Leila Aboulela's *Coloured Lights* (2001), a collection of short stories, often read using diasporic, religious, or feminist lenses, offers an insightful exploration of emotion and spiritual elements through her Sudanese female characters belonging to several walks of life. This paper reinterprets the text through the cultural sediment of the Red Sea, a socio-political corridor that once shaped Sudan's trade, pilgrimage, politics, and religious exchange. The argument supports the existence of a post-maritime memory and consciousness amongst the characters authored by Aboulela, who embody a post-maritime memory and consciousness in which the circulations, once flourishing across the Red Sea, drift through their faith, memory, and belonging. This study explores how the Red Sea's legacy of continuity, devotion, and displacement is imprinted into the characters authored by Aboulela, through close readings of the short stories "The Museum," "Souvenirs," and "Coloured Lights." The spiritual and emotional states of the characters, as portrayed through the gestures of prayer, nostalgia, and cross-cultural intimacy in her text, mirror the Red Sea's ebb and flow. This narrative transforms the Red Sea's geopolitical currents into carriers of cultural, emotional, and spiritual exchange, suggesting that devotion and longing play an undeniable role in its legacy. This approach further shapes the gendered experience of the characters, especially women, whether situated in Sudan or abroad, offering ways to rethink postcolonial memory through the residual maritime history.

PANEL 2. MARITIME DYNAMICS AND EMERGING ORDERS

Chair: Moin S. Hakak - CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

Federico Donelli - University of Trieste

Entangled Seas and Shores: The Rise of a Hybrid Security Complex in the Red Sea-Western Indian Ocean

Since 2023, Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in the Bab al-Mandeb Strait have drawn global attention to the impact of land-based conflicts on maritime security. However, Yemen is less the central object of analysis and more a revealing case of a broader structural shift unfolding across the Red Sea and the Western Indian Ocean. Contrary to the conventional assumption that the land domain is fragmented and conflict-prone while the maritime domain is cooperative and governed by regimes, this research uses RSCT to argue that the Red Sea is becoming a hybrid security complex. In this emerging configuration, terrestrial and maritime threats, actors, and strategic logics increasingly intersect, producing a cross-domain security environment. The Yemeni case illustrates how non-state armed groups, cross-border rivalries, and shifting territorial control can enable the projection of force into maritime spaces. This has implications that ripple across global shipping routes and regional geopolitical competition. Similar dynamics are visible in adjacent theatres, where infrastructural vulnerabilities, great-power rivalries, and the involvement of Gulf, African, and Asian actors create an increasingly entangled security landscape stretching into the Indian Ocean. The research argues that understanding this emerging hybrid order requires analytical and policy approaches that transcend traditional land-sea divides. Without progress on land-based governance and conflict resolution, maritime insecurity will likely trigger oscillating strategies by external stakeholders, combining short-term protective measures with more selective engagement in regional stabilization. Thus, the Red Sea-Western Indian Ocean arena represents a critical space where historical interconnections are producing new forms of security entanglement.

PANEL 2. MARITIME DYNAMICS AND EMERGING ORDERS

Chair: Moin S. Hakak - CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

Arnab Das - Maritime Research Center, Pune

Indian Ocean Region in the New Global Order - A New Perspective Based on the Underwater Domain Awareness Framework

The 21st century is witnessing a significant shift in the strategic focus on the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Trade, resource movement, energy security, demography and many more are the driving forces towards this strategic shift. It is critical for us to appreciate that the majority of the resources, threats, opportunities and concerns emanate from the underwater domain, both in the marine and freshwater systems. The tropical waters of the IOR further add to the complexity, given the rich biodiversity, substantial undersea mineral resources and high population density, leading to unique socio-economic, socio-political and socio-cultural dynamics. Good governance demands enhanced domain awareness; however, the underwater technology development that took place during the Cold War Era only served the temperate and polar regions. The sonar (developed in the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap), being the only device for underwater survey, suffers 60% degradation when deployed in the tropical waters of the IOR. Geopolitics ensures that the extra-regional powers continue to push these technologies to the developing states of this region, with scant regard to their efficacy on the ground, using the security boogey. Thus, we seem to be in a situation where the IOR has significant resources, but continues to be economically underdeveloped and more importantly, the unregulated and aggressive push towards the blue economy threatens serious concerns of unsustainability and high climate risk. The Underwater Domain Awareness (UDA) framework proposed by the author presents a comprehensive, structured and inclusive way forward to ensure pooling of resources and synergizing of efforts across the stakeholders, ensuring optimal resource deployment. It provides nuanced policy & technology intervention along with capacity & capability building to manage the unique tropical challenges and opportunities in the IOR and beyond. The UDA framework-driven Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) will be a game changer for good governance, both in the marine and freshwater systems.

PANEL 2. MARITIME DYNAMICS AND EMERGING ORDERS

Chair: Moin S. Hakak - CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

Sara Cosatti - University of Trieste

From the Highlands to the Sea: Ethiopia's Aims within the Emerging Indo-Pacific Order

Ethiopia's objective of gaining Red Sea access was concretized with the 2024 Memorandum of Understanding with Somaliland, foreshadowing growing consciousness regarding strategies to reframe its regional and international posture. Though not conventionally viewed as an Indo-Pacific actor, Ethiopia increasingly engages with dynamics that link the Red Sea and the western Indo-Pacific corridor, presenting itself as an inherently potential naval actor. This article examines the role of Ethiopia as an unconventional player, gaining legitimization by domestic imperatives – namely economic fragility, political instability, and sovereignty concerns – and systemic pressures – including maritime competition among regional and extra-regional powers. The analysis argues that Ethiopia's maritime push marks an attempt to reduce endemic fragilities and project itself within emerging Indo-Pacific architectures shaped by global rivalry, connectivity agendas, and shifting alliances. By tracing Ethiopia's evolving strategic outlook, the article highlights the agency of actors traditionally considered peripheral, which, on the contrary, strategically navigate and shape global transformations and remarks on the strategic value of the Horn of Africa, which is becoming increasingly entangled with growingly expanding geopolitical arenas such as the Indo-Pacific.

PANEL 2. MARITIME DYNAMICS AND EMERGING ORDERS

Chair: Moin S. Hakak - CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

Dona Ganguly - Bhawanipur Education Society, Calcutta University

Maritime Dynamics of India's Act East Policy: The Indian Ocean Perspective

India's relations with Southeast Asian countries in the post-Cold War Era are largely shaped by its Act East Policy (AEP), evolving from the Look East Policy initiated in the 1990s. Driven by economic reforms, globalization, and shifting geopolitics, AEP aims to strengthen ties with Southeast Asia, leveraging historical, cultural, and economic linkages. Buddhism, Hinduism, and trade connections have long intertwined India and Southeast Asia, reinforced by geographic proximity and shared borders with Myanmar. The policy thrusts Northeast India into the spotlight, leveraging its proximity to Southeast Asia for economic growth and cultural exchange. Connectivity initiatives like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway are crucial for regional development. AEP marks a shift towards proactive engagement, focusing on infrastructure, port-led growth, and naval collaborations. The Indian Ocean plays a pivotal role, serving as a vital maritime corridor for trade and security. India's engagement with ASEAN nations, Japan, and the US underscores its efforts to ensure a stable, rules-based maritime order. In response to China's rise, India's eastward engagement became more security-oriented, expanding to the Western and Southern Pacific.

AEP's success hinges on sustained engagement, infrastructure development, and addressing regional concerns, underscoring India's commitment to a stable and prosperous Southeast Asia. By prioritizing maritime cooperation, India aims to emerge as a key player in the Indo-Pacific, fostering economic growth, security, and strategic autonomy.

This study examines India's Act East Policy through a qualitative lens, analyzing historical records, academic journals, government websites, and print media to understand the policy's evolution and implications for regional dynamics. The research highlights India's efforts to balance economic and security interests in the Indian Ocean, navigating complex geopolitical relationships and promoting cooperative frameworks for regional prosperity.

PANEL 2. MARITIME DYNAMICS AND EMERGING ORDERS

Chair: Moin S. Hakak - CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

Vijay Sakhuja - India Council of World Affairs, New Delhi
Cholas': The Front Runners of India's Maritime Strategy

The contemporary Indian Navy strategy is deeply rooted in its ancient maritime prowess and is evocative of the Cholas' maritime dominance in the Bay of Bengal. The Chola kings, particularly Rajaraja and his son Rajendra Choladeva I, enjoyed unprecedented maritime supremacy with an ocean-going fleet.

In 1025 A.D., Rajendra Choladeva I dispatched an expeditionary force to Southeast Asia to conduct a foray against the Srivijaya Kingdom. There is no credible evidence to determine the cause of the deterioration in relations between Srivijaya and Chola kings, but several plausible reasons, such as the former's attempt to strangle Indian trade with China, the latter's need for additional resources through plunder, or the Chola pattern of expansion, could have been instrumental in ordering the naval raid against Srivijaya territories.

In its tactical construct, the naval raid showcased the Chola military's maritime capability to undertake distant voyages and the ability to build a colossal logistical supply chain to support such a large and expansive naval operation across the seas. The raid resulted in the defeat of the Srivijaya kingdom at several places and showcased the consistent and aggressive maritime mercantile policy that was marshalled for the naval raid.

PANEL 3. LOCAL ACTORS IN A CONNECTED RED SEA-INDIAN OCEAN

Chair: Alka S. Yadav - CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

Nicola Melis - University of Cagliari

Hodeidah as a Maritime Contact Zone: Ottoman Governance, Local Networks, and Red Sea Entanglements (1850–1918)

This paper examines Hodeidah as a maritime contact zone where Ottoman imperial authority, local power structures, and transregional mobility converged between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Instead of treating the Red Sea as a mere corridor of circulation, the study approaches Hodeidah as a space where actors constantly reshaped governance, commerce, and social relations through the interplay of imperial directives and regional dynamics. Drawing on Ottoman archival materials (BOA), Arab chronicles, Italian and French consular records, the paper reconstructs the everyday functioning of this port city. It situates it within the broader networks of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Hodeidah emerges as a frontier of negotiated sovereignty. Ottoman governors, urban notables, tribal leaders, merchants, and foreign consuls advanced competing claims over taxation, maritime policing, mobility control, and port administration. Their overlapping jurisdictions generated frictions that exposed both the reach and the limits of imperial power. The paper also highlights how seasonal mobility, pilgrimage flows, coastal trade, and labour migration shaped the city's social and economic landscape, revealing the web of connections linking Africa, Yemen, and the Arabian Peninsula through Hodeidah.

Using a connected-history approach, the study argues that Hodeidah offers an ideal vantage point from which to interrogate the entanglements that characterised the Red Sea in the late Ottoman period. By analysing interactions among local actors, imperial institutions, and transregional networks, the paper contributes to broader debates on maritime borderlands, hybrid sovereignties, and the circulation of people, goods, and norms across oceanic spaces. Ultimately, Hodeidah illustrates how both connectivity and tension shaped political authority and economic life in a strategically crucial region.

PANEL 3. LOCAL ACTORS IN A CONNECTED RED SEA-INDIAN OCEAN

Chair: Alka S. Yadav - CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

Anmol Mukhia – South Asian University, Delhi

Classical Geopolitical Perspectives on Trade and Security in the Indian Ocean-Red Sea Region

This paper focuses on trade and security for the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, with a primary emphasis on securing 'vital trade routes' and managing 'strategic competition.' For India, this involves protecting its sea lines of communication and acting as a net security provider, while for China, it is engaged in a broader Indo-Pacific security dynamic. The Red Sea is a sensitive region due to its proximity to the Middle East and the presence of major naval forces, which exacerbates tensions related to the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. This paper draws on the classical geopolitical thinkers, such as Nicholas J. Spykman and Alfred Thayer Mahan, for their interpretations of the rimland and sea power to address the trade and security imperatives for the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. Perceived in a holistic perspective, assemblages of interrelated and at times overlapping strategic geographies give form and meaning to various security landscapes. These security landscapes and seascapes of both the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea are anchored in a highly dynamic world of geopolitics and are subjected to ongoing reassessment by geostrategy in light of multiscalar transformations and transitions.

PANEL 3. LOCAL ACTORS IN A CONNECTED RED SEA-INDIAN OCEAN

Chair: Alka S. Yadav - CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

Viola Pacini - University of Bologna

Regional Shifts and Local Adaptations: The Careers of Two Baluchi Enslavers (1930s-1940s)

Despite being a fundamental actor in the slavery systems of the Indian Ocean, raiders and traffickers are often overlooked in historical studies. This paper focuses on Shakar bin Murar and Mirza bin Barakat, two Baluchi enslavers who were active in the late 1930s and early 1940s. They mostly raided the Persian Mekran and the Batinah coast of Oman and sold their captives to the Arab Yal Sa'ad tribe. As it would be argued, slavers' activities were both the product of and response to local and regional developments on a social, political and economic level. The slaving zones exploited by Shakar and Mirza and the partnership they created were influenced by a series of factors on a micro and macro level. These included the British campaign against the slave trade and arms smuggling, the wretched conditions of Persian Baluchistan, the political fragmentation of Southeastern Arabia and the rise of the Saudi kingdom as an oil exporter. While some of these elements caused the persistence of both the demand for and availability of enslaveable people, other factors tested the slavers' ability to constantly adapt to regional and local shifts in order to pursue their business.

The main sources on which this paper is based are collected in the British India Office Records and Private Papers and Foreign Office archives. They are mostly letters, official reports and witnesses from fugitive captives. Despite their fragmented nature, these sources can be successfully used to reconstruct lives and contexts.

PANEL 3. LOCAL ACTORS IN A CONNECTED RED SEA-INDIAN OCEAN

Chair: Alka S. Yadav - CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

Jubin Easow Abraham - University of Kerala, Trivandrum

Chains and Confluences: Traversing the Entangled Lives within the Transoceanic and Indigenous Slave Systems in Dutch Cochin

Historically, the institution of slavery on the Malabar coast was geographically confined, demographically insular, and ethnically delimited. Within this system, the untouchable castes remained as agricultural slaves, bound to the land of their lords. The advent of the Europeans initiated a transoceanic network of slavery in the region. Besides local forms of slavery, the Malabar coast thus experienced a commodified form of slavery in which people were not only bought and sold but also forcibly taken away for long-distance export. By the eighteenth century, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) had evolved as a pivotal player in the Indian Ocean slave market, effectively dominating the route connecting the Red Sea with the Indonesian archipelago. This control facilitated the influx of East African slaves into the Indian Ocean colonial networks. Cochin, in this expansive transnational slave trade, emerged as a node that facilitated the movement and sale of enslaved individuals. The presence of African slaves in Cochin opens up a novel avenue for the convergences of the colonial slaving practices with the indigenous caste-based servitude. This article delves into the pivotal question of how the transoceanic slave trade between the Dutch Cochin and the Red Sea intersected, negotiated, and conflicted with Kerala's historically entrenched social structures. By examining the question, the study paves the groundwork for more extensive historical inquiries: What happened to the slaves following the Dutch occupation in Cochin? Did they integrate into the local communities?

PANEL 3. LOCAL ACTORS IN A CONNECTED RED SEA-INDIAN OCEAN

Chair: Alka S. Yadav - CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

Sama Hany Farouk Darwish - Mansoura University

The Effect of the Nationalization of the Suez Canal on the Reshaping of Trade Networks in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean in the Post-Colonial Era

The Suez Canal stands as one of the most important strategic waterways in maritime navigation, connecting major global trading axes. Since the canal has a major effect, it became a focal point of struggle, which explains why the momentous act of nationalization in July 1956 had huge effects on the geo-economic balances of power. These profound effects are inextricably linked to the broader processes of the Post-Colonial Era, as the assertion of sovereignty over vital economic assets shifted.

While most studies focus on the political and military dimensions of the Suez Crisis, often overlooking the long-term structural transformation in regional trade, the main purpose of this paper is to analyze the effect of nationalization on the reshaping of trade routes and networks in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

To achieve this objective, the current research adopts a historical-economic analytical framework that draws upon a diverse array of primary and secondary sources, including governmental documents, navigation data, trade statistics, port records, news sources, and academic studies.

The study is anticipated to reveal the emergence of new logistics hubs across the Red Sea and Indian Ocean basins, such as ports in the Arabian Peninsula or East Africa. Furthermore, it will show how several nations shifted their reliance on the canal. This paper contributes to the academic literature by offering a comprehensive vision that links national sovereignty with the subsequent geopolitical and economic dynamics of the post-colonial Middle East.

PANEL 4. TRADING ROUTES AND STRATEGIC NODES

Chair: Rohini Panicker - CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

Tilottama Mukherjee - Syamaprasad College, University of Calcutta
The Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia: Analyzing the Inter-connectedness

Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean are interconnected geographically as Southeast Asia's maritime and mainland areas border the Indian Ocean. This relationship is vital for global trade because the region is a major hub for shipping lanes and possesses significant economic and strategic importance due to its location between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The Southeast Asian region is strategically vital as it sits at crucial chokepoints between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, which facilitates international trade. Historically, maritime trade has fostered strong cultural and economic links between Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. Besides the geographical and economic inter-connectedness, there is also deep cultural intermeshing between the two regions. Therefore, this enmeshment pervades different realms, right from maritime trade, cultural exchange, strategic importance, presence of historical trade routes, spread of religions and languages such as Sanskrit and Islam, to ultimately, modern-day economic and trade ties. Present-day efforts of littoral countries such as India, in designing initiatives like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), are furthering their interconnectedness. Since at least the 5th century BC, the Indian Ocean has facilitated the trade networks between Southeast Asia on the one hand and India, China and the Middle East on the other. Traders and missionaries from South Asia went to Southeast Asia through the Indian Ocean, and played an extremely important role in the spread of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam across Southeast Asia and have continued to influence their governance, language and architecture over the centuries. The Indian Ocean is also known to have facilitated the transfer of agricultural goods, technologies and spices from South Asia to Southeast Asia.

PANEL 4. TRADING ROUTES AND STRATEGIC NODES

Chair: Rohini Panicker - CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

Beatrice Nicolini - Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan
Gwadar: The Strategic Gem Shaping the Future of Southwest Asia

This study examines the historical evolution of Gwadar, tracing its transformation from a modest fishing settlement into a strategically positioned port city shaped by the intersecting regional and international interests. Through a chronological reconstruction, it highlights Gwadar's simultaneous roles during the second half of the nineteenth century: as an Omani enclave under the Sultans, as a region contested by the Gichki family of Kech Makran, as an observation post for British authorities monitoring Makran and Persia, and as an operational station along the Indo-European Telegraph Line. A critical moment in this trajectory occurred on 24 September 1872, when the British Boundary Commission, together with the Persian Commissioner Mirza Ma'sum Khan, demarcated the territorial frontiers from the bay of Gwatar to the west of Gwadar, formalizing boundaries between Persia, Makran, and Sistan. The study similarly considers the political and economic implications of Gwadar's later transition, culminating in its purchase on 8 September 1958, when the request of the Khans of Kalat to restore the jagir granted by Mir Nasir Khan I to the Al Bu-Sa'id dynasty was met with a payment of three million pounds. With limited and often fragmented literature on Baloch socio-political life in the nineteenth century, the study aims to clarify how today's Gwadar embodies historically entrenched cultural and political pluralities. By situating Gwadar within Southwest Asian coastal networks, the desert expanse of Baluchistan, Oman, and the wider Indian Ocean world, the study seeks to shed light on the interactions between coastal mercantile communities and inland pastoral societies, examining the shifting dynamics of authority, trade, and territoriality across this maritime-continental interface.

PANEL 4. TRADING ROUTES AND STRATEGIC NODES

Chair: Rohini Panicker - CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

Kaustav Ghosh Roy - University of Delhi

Ancient Bengal and Its Earliest River Networks and Maritime Trading Routes against the Backdrop of the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean Littoral Trade in South Asia

Ancient Bengal and its constituent historical geography, viz., its deltaic locations and trading ports, have been described by historians and archaeologists as crucial for the better understanding of the earliest nature of maritime trade and commerce across the Indian Ocean littoral. Historical sources from various periods have specified that the trading routes and maritime networks originating from the Bengal delta promoted a significant socio-economic and religious interaction throughout the littorals of South Asia.

Sources also mention the importance of Monsoon winds, which facilitated the operations of maritime activities and trading networks between ancient Bengal and the South-Southeast Asian regions, the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea. The vast river networks feeding the delta and its waterways acted as arteries for the greater transportation of goods from the selected ports and trading outposts across the length and breadth of the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. These functional trading networks remained significant in action despite a reduction in trading activities by the tenth century CE, while bridging culture and civilization across the littoral of South Asia.

This study concisely demonstrates the cultural-historical and economic significance of the ancient Bengal basin as a point of origin for early maritime trade across the Indian Ocean littoral in South Asia and elicits the need for a broader interdisciplinary approach for studying ancient maritime history and archaeology of the Indian Ocean.

PANEL 4. TRADING ROUTES AND STRATEGIC NODES

Chair: Rohini Panicker - CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

Priyanka Chand - Pondicherry University
Merchants Connecting Red Sea and Indian Ocean World

From the rise of Islam in the seventh century to the eve of the advent of European powers in the Indian Ocean, the trade was dominated by the Arab and the Indian Merchants. The trade was peacefully conducted in the Red Sea, linking the Mediterranean world with the Indian Ocean. From the seventh to the fifteenth century, there was long-distance trade going on between South China and the Eastern Mediterranean. However, in the thirteenth century, the direct passage from Baghdad to Canton declined, and instead, emporia rose. Shorter routes connected the major ports of Baghdad, Hormuz, Cambay, Calicut, Melaka and Canton. During the thirteenth century, Muslims were majorly active in the emporia trade routes on the west coast of the Indian Ocean and in the major Islamic state of Gujarat. Gujarati merchants, both Hindu and Muslim, were especially prominent. Hindus from Gujarat tended to settle in port cities on the Indian Ocean littoral, while Muslims had a flourishing trade north and west to the Gulf and Red Sea, and east and South to Malabar and South East Asia. These merchants were based in the port cities in the Gulf of Cambay, of which Cambay itself was the most important. The Portuguese Tome Pires wrote in about 1515: "Cambay stretches out two arms; with her right arm she reaches out towards Aden, and with the other towards Malacca."

The paper will explore the trade routes connecting the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean world, the commodities in which the trade was conducted, to analyse the changing paradigm of the Indian Ocean from the sixteenth century and how it affected the existing prosperous trade in the western Indian Ocean.

PANEL 4. TRADING ROUTES AND STRATEGIC NODES

Chair: Rohini Panicker - CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

Debankita Das - University of Hyderabad

Cultural Mobility across the Bay of Bengal: A Case Study of Odisha's Coast-maritime Interaction

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) conceptualised the idea of a unified “Indian Oceanness” among countries bordering the vast ocean in March 1995 for socio-economic and disaster management purposes. The association has initiated development of the Indian Ocean region(s) along with the low barrier-free flow of goods. Such initiation poignantly links to the legacy of the history of the “Indian Ocean Interaction Sphere” since the 3rd century BCE. This interactive sphere had evolved diverse network zones and shaped cultural pluralities. The present paper draws on the interactions to stimulate discussions on the eastern Indian Oceanic realm, specifically the “Bay of Bengal Interaction Area”. Firstly, by focusing on India’s Odisha coast-maritime zone from the 4th century CE to the 10th century CE, the paper will delve into the exchange networks of cultural knowledge and ideas that flowed trans-regionally. In this context, the study will highlight the past heritage flows across the eastern Indian Ocean through the lens of archaeological and inscriptional sources. That the interaction did not occur in isolation, but also due to the power play of multiple political entities, will be discussed. Secondly, the paper will chart the voyage of a Buddhist manuscript from Odisha as part of knowledge exchange to South-East Asia and China, followed by an illustrated example of shared maritime festivals, which, in a way, commemorate the past maritime journeys. The discussion will conclude with an invitation to bring awareness to the past facets of diverse mobility across the vast oceanscape for the contemporary development endeavours.

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