



Book Review

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Edward A. Alpers, *The Indian Ocean in World History*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014, 172 pp., US \$ 19.95 (paperback), ISBN 978015337877

The last decade of the 20th century saw a major shift in discourse as academics began to challenge the existing “European-centric” discourse by focusing on the rest of the world. This shift in focus generated themes for a multitude of inquiries to encompass the shared past. This volume is a part of a series of publications by Oxford University Press to create a “New” World history, which attempts to investigate and analyse the shared human experiences in the past. Authored by historian Edward A. Alpers, the book is an important contribution in this series of “New World History” and explores the Indian Ocean both spatially and historically. The author provides the reader a new perspective from which to understand the Indian Ocean within the context of world history. The theme that emerges strongly from this book is that oceans are not just barriers, but connecting barriers which have time and again proved their dominance in shaping the historical past.

The book covers a time period from the ancient Mesopotamian civilization to the 20th century. The narrative highlights several aspects of the Indian Ocean region, by breaking away from the conventional conjectures of continental history. Alpers’ deep

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understanding of the Indian Ocean region and his multidisciplinary approach to sources are quite remarkable, as he provides a precise yet succinct understanding of multifaceted issues of cultural exchange. The diverse use of sources – archeological, literary, oral testimonies, art, music and poems – is distinctive, as it acknowledges those who have otherwise been forgotten or neglected. Using the Indian Ocean as a highway to antiquity, the book provides an insightful analysis of how local histories shaped global process through interactions and encounters.

The book provides a lucid understanding of the Indian Ocean world. Written from a broader perspective, it elaborates the processes of cultural exchanges rather than emphasising the events or networks. This makes it explicitly unparalleled as it offers an understanding of the past as an inclusive connecting process. The book is divided into six chapters, chronologically from ancient to modern, and it focuses on how the trading networks not only led to the exchange of commodities, culture, religion, ideas, values and technology, but also played a crucial role in influencing patterns of migration, identity formation and cultural changes.

In the introduction to the book, the author presents the various activities in the Indian Ocean region through time and space, setting up a background for the reader. Using elaborative sources ranging from archeological finds to travelers' accounts, he presents a brief historiographical analysis of the region. The author highlights the dynamics of the Indian Ocean and stresses the challenges faced by writers in defining it, and the limitation of the sources available. The author inquires "when and from where" do we begin identifying the oceans as a subject of historical inquiry, given that history has been dominated by defined structures of political entities such as nations and states, while oceans were often viewed as the frontiers of continents. Alpers suggests that to define the dynamics of the Indian Ocean, it is essential to understand its vastness and complexity, not just geographically but politically. The author elucidates the meaning and boundaries of the Indian Ocean during different time periods and situates it in the global context.

Taking readers on a historical tour of antiquity, the second chapter of the book explores the growth and expansion of trade during Ancient times. Spanning several millennia, it explores how oceanic currents led to the establishment and formation of connections from Africa to China. To begin with, it traces the trade relations of ancient Mesopotamia through Ubaid pottery shards, emphasising the trade linkages through the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf. The author articulates how the trading networks between the Red Sea and Arabian Gulf spread over time throughout the

Indian Ocean. Records of trade and commerce during this period are found in accounts by various travelers like Pliny, Plotomy, etc. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, written by an anonymous Greek sailor who visited India in the second half of the 1st century, has received the author's particular attention.

The next chapter explains the rise and spread of Islam. As the title, "Becoming an Islamic Sea", suggests, the chapter eloquently shows the intertwined relationship between the rapid growth of networks and the rise of Islam; in three decades, it spread from Egypt to western India. The author demonstrates the establishment of a trading circuit which is marked by "in and out" participation of various actors derived by commodities, religion and slaves. He points out how this growth and expansion of the trading circuit also facilitated interactions between different religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. However, the author does not elaborate on the latter, since the focus remains on the spread and growth of Islam. Another key issue highlighted in this chapter is the connotation of piracy, which the author appropriately describes as a relationship between "security and violence".

The next two chapters focus on the rise and expansion of European powers. The author aptly encapsulates the hegemonic authority of Great Britain in the modern world by describing the transformation of the Indian Ocean from an "Islamic Sea" to a "British lake". At the outset, he discusses the constant struggle for power between European nations to increase their influence in the Indian Ocean network. This, he opines, not only paved the way for technological advancement but also led to the opening up of new routes and ports.

This led to active participation by the merchant class from coastal areas, which resulted in social and cultural exchanges. He makes a remarkable effort to elaborate how the global shift of trade and balance of power affected the regional production and society. The book thereafter delves into the role of industrial capitalism in determining the pace and direction of trade. The advent of industrial capitalism accelerated the demand for overseas commodities, which increased the importance of maritime security.

Alpers offers the reader a constructivist understanding of the Indian Ocean, and brings in a fascinating analysis of issues that have been often missed out in the West-centric discourse. The role of slavery and indentured labour deserves special attention; despite the fact that they played a crucial role in shaping the Empire, they have often missed historical attention. Alpers has also attempted to acknowledge and trace the patterns of migration, and its significance and effects. Using interviews of African slaves

collected by “Royal Navy Antislavery Patrol” (p. 107), he presents an impression of what it was like for slaves to travel in a ship. Another issue that emerges is the how this “mobility and migration caused the spread of diseases” (p. 125), as this not only led to political and economic changes but also ensured demographic and ecological transformation. Although the author highlights several crucial aspects of the exchange network, he misses certain important events. The structural European takeover was marked not just by human immigration, but also by that of plants, animals and even microorganisms, which created a triumph of biological and ecological takeovers.

The last chapter, “The Last Century”, traces the relevance and importance of oil in shaping patterns of migration and trade from the 20th century onwards. The author stresses that the discovery of oil has revolutionised the global economy, which has impacted various modes of transport and has brought changes to the internal and external dynamics of Islam, as most of the oil producing countries are Islamic monarchies. The ongoing exploration and exploitation of oil has had an adverse impact on human security as well as on the environment. This, he opines, will continue, as oil will dominate the nature, pace and direction of trade in the Indian Ocean. Although the author appropriately summarises many developments that dominate the century, he certainly does not place much emphasis on the first half of the century. The devastating effect of World War I and the growing importance of commodities like rubber and timber caused a major shift in production and trading patterns. Also, the commercialisation of crops like sugar, rubber and tea played an important role in determining patterns and trends of trade.

The book, makes remarkable attempt to acknowledge and analyse activities in the Indian Ocean and highlights its significant contribution in shaping world history. Despite a few shortcomings, the book emerges as an asset to anyone who wants to understand and explore the dynamics of the Indian Ocean in world history. The eloquent use of maps and illustrations in the text, followed by a brief timeline at the end, helps the reader in gaining better insight into the Indian Ocean. The exhaustive use of primary sources and a further suggestive guide make it an essential read for historians and students interested in studying trade and migration.