

BOOK REVIEW

The Ocean of Churn – How the Indian Ocean Shaped Human History, Sanjeev Sanyal, Gurugram, India, Penguin Random House, 2016, 297 pp., ₹599, ISBN 9780670087327

The Indian Ocean is the third largest water body in the world, containing vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs), which sustain the economies of countries in the region. It has gained further strategic importance in recent years by facilitating East–West exchanges. The Indian Ocean Rim is significant not only due to its strategic location, and the value of the trade that passes, but also due to its history that has shaped the present and will certainly influence the future. The book has come at a very relevant point in time when the Indian Ocean is truly churning and shaping the future of global politics.

Sanjeev Sanyal in his book *The Ocean of Churn* seeks to understand the Indian Ocean from a unique point of view, instead of seeing it as merely a “supplier” to a rather “independent” region. The author has succeeded in highlighting the linkages between various civilisations, by portraying global history through a maritime perspective. This book complements his earlier work titled *Land of the Seven Rivers: A Brief History of India’s Geography* published in 2012, which gave a fascinating, continental perspective of the Indian subcontinent. The new book focuses on the maritime dimension of the region, thereby completing the picture.

The author has attempted to fill gaps between the classical western outlook and those of indigenous scholars. Apart from including immediate neighbours in his definition of the Indian Ocean Rim, he attempts to afford an expansive view that is not restricted to a geographical definition of Indian Ocean.

The book provides readers with a rare insight into the glorious past of the Indian Ocean, by giving vivid accounts of ancient travelers and by incorporating the author’s personal experiences. The familiarity of the author with the littoral environment is evident, as he has spent most of his life in cities which lie along the Indian Ocean coast, such as Kolkata, Mumbai and Singapore.

The content of the book can broadly be divided into two thematic halves. The first half narrates various mythologies and popular folklores of the Indian Ocean countries, in a chronological sequence. The latter half gives a vivid account of the evolution of commerce, maritime trade, cultural exchanges, political rivalries and military conflict between countries connected by the Indian Ocean.

The book is written in a simple, easy-to-read manner, by incorporating popular tales, and draws a connection between storytelling and history. The spatial frame of reference starts in AD 731 when the Pallava dynasty in the south of India witnessed an existential crisis. When the Pallava King, Parameswara Varman II, died without leaving a successor, a delegation of Brahmins undertook a dangerous and tiring journey over land and water, to Cambodia. The quest ended with the anointment of a 12-year-old successor from Cambodia, the archeological evidence for which can be traced to inscriptions on temple walls of India and Cambodia. The author supports this tale and other stories with archeological evidence. He also draws various other connections between South India and Southeast Asia, which are not merely restricted to the exchange of goods and culture.

The author makes mention of the interactions and exchanges between the eastern and western Indian Ocean, which according to him do not always involve India or Indians

despite the country's prominent geographical location, and extensive cultural and economic linkages. He also describes the arrival of Vasco da Gama and other Europeans, and the shift of the economic center of activity from the Indian Ocean, to the Atlantic and subsequently in the second half of the twentieth century, towards the Pacific Rim.

Sanjeev Sanyal acknowledges the role of natural factors in influencing and shaping human history, by describing the aftermath of the Sumatra island earthquake. He goes on to highlight the place that natural calamities occupied in folklore and its oral transmission to latter generations of aboriginal tribes, who arrived in the region 3000 years ago. The book thus provides reader a broad overview of prehistoric times and how geographic and human landscapes were formed in the Indian Ocean Rim.

The book also narrates the discovery of agriculture and gives an account of the ancient maritime hub of Dholavira. The author seeks to establish historical and cultural links between Vedic India and ancient Iran. Here too, he uses archaeological evidence and Vedic links in a fascinating manner to support these facts.

The author manages to draw and keep the attention of the reader by using phrases like "Kharavela's Revenge" and "Ashoka, the not so Great" in his book, which question the popular image of these prominent rulers. He has succeeded in blending historical narratives with the present, in a logical and captivating manner. While narrating stories and describing ancient pictorial depictions on temple walls, the author does not dwell too much on military aspects, but affords an overall perspective. He time and again emphasises the importance of Indian ports like Satvahana and Kalinga, which had extensive trade with Vietnam and Egypt. While narrating the legend of "Kaundinya's Wedding" (p. 82), he underscores the fact that Indians sailed extensively and frequently to carry out trade in the region, and hence reinforces the importance of the ocean to Indian exports and imports. The book does not dwell at length on religion, food and art exchange, but focusses more on trade, which is described prominently in the second half of the book.

While describing the Indo-Roman trade routes, the author provides historical evidence such as *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* - written in AD first century, which also served to increase such migration - in great detail. These mass movements of people were furthered by India's central location, causing it to act as the link between the Eastern and Western Indian Ocean. The author talks about the necessity for such migrations for promoting cultural exchanges within the region, which in turn tend to spur greater commercial interactions.

Moving ahead in chronological order, the book gives an interesting account of the origin of the Gupta Empire and its extraordinary economic and cultural accomplishments, which led to the christening of that period as the "Golden Age" in Indian history. It captures the encroachment of Arabs into the neighbouring countries, and the sudden rise of Islam, ultimately changing the power dynamics of the Indian Ocean Rim. The influx of Arabs in the Indian Ocean region further led to the constant circulation of merchants and sailors, bringing about globalisation in medieval times, according to the author.

The second part of the book deals with trade flow, in and around the Indian Ocean. This included import and export of goods such as rice, spice, diamonds and opium. The author presents a robust analysis of facts while explaining the evolution of commerce and maritime trade between different Indian Ocean countries. Even after the political and cultural upheavals due to Arab invasion, trade continued between Southeast Asian countries - Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam and beyond. The author also describes the prevalent role of women in conducting trade in the markets. The book also gives a fascinating account of the relationship between commerce and geopolitics, especially in the context of the Chola dynasty, which was knit in a sophisticated network of multinational guilds financed by the temple banks.

The book describes the instability in Central Asia due to the troublesome ventures of Turks and Mongols. The author also makes mention of how the Arabs blocked information about the Indian Ocean from reaching Europeans in the medieval period.

In the concluding chapter, the author describes the arrival of Europeans, and the First World War, a period when the Indian Ocean was ignored. The book transitions from a historical perspective to the present narrative of the Indian Ocean, in a logical, structured and arguably captivating manner. In many instances, it also showcases the current geopolitical rivalry between India and China, viewing it from the prism of history. The book does not claim to offer an insight into the future prospects of the Indian Ocean Rim, but in a constructive manner provides a historical account of the political, economic, sociocultural and natural conditions that have shaped the region. It is written in the style of a travelogue as opposed to a classic history book, which renders it “reader-friendly” and very interesting. It is an ideal book for those who would like to know the essential factors that have shaped the Indian Ocean littoral space through the ages, without going into great detail on any one of them.

With renewed interest in the study of the Indian Ocean, the book turns out to be an interesting amalgamation of facts, supported well with anecdotal and material evidence. It is a book targeted at readers interested in the maritime past of the region, and it serves this audience well.

Note

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2017.1319613>

