

BOOK REVIEW

Ocean of trade: South Asian merchants, Africa and the Indian Ocean, c1750–1850, Pedro Machado, Cambridge University Press, 2014, 329 pp., US\$65.00 (pbk), ISBN 978-11070264

The book is an addition to the discourse on maritime history whose evocation we owe to Fernand Braudel's path-breaking work on the Mediterranean Sea. Drawing largely from Braudel's idea of inseparable ties between the sea and land, and Perigrin Horden and Nicholus Purcell's concept of "history of the sea" as well "history in the sea", the present volume by Pedro Machado, like contemporary historian M.N. Pearson, advances to trace the myriad trade routes and articulately shifts the epistemological focus towards the role of the Indian Ocean. With the dawning twenty-first century and shifting academic discourse from Eurocentric to the other parts of world, a new genre of historians have emerged, questioning the conventional understanding by focusing on the Indian Ocean, as it has not just been a connecting bridge between Asia and Africa but has witnessed the earliest maritime activities.

Tracing a historical journey of goods through oceans, analysing the changing patterns and their implications on global economy during early modern era, the book explores a different interpretation of oceanic circulation, between India and coastal Africa. The author makes a remarkable attempt to highlight the intertwined relationship between coastal western India and the African markets, and links them to the demand and supply from the western world. It draws attention to geo-spatially distant but inter-connected regions as, on one hand, the north-eastern coasts of Africa interacted with the Mediterranean world and, on the other hand, the ports of south-eastern Africa maintained an intimate relationship with western India, which provided them commercial capital and textiles. Addressing themes that have often been overlooked, the volume introduces a new framework to understand the varying nuances of maritime networking and circulation of commodities. The key actors that played a significant role in facilitating the trading network, according to the author, are South Asian Vaniya merchants, situated in the strategically located coastal town of western India Gujarat; they not only played a critical role in overseas trading network but also contributed significantly in shaping the cultural identities in South Asia and Africa, further adding to subaltern discourse. Machado's deep understanding of the Indian Ocean region and his multidisciplinary approach to sources is quite remarkable as he provides a precise yet succinct understanding of multifaceted issues of cultural exchange.

Divided into five chapters, each focusing on a certain aspect of the Indo-African overseas network, the volume gives a detailed analysis of intertwined histories between India and Africa. Machado throws light on the largely forgotten contribution of the South Asian mercantile community, specifically the role of Vaniyas from Gujarat in facilitating the Indian Ocean trade network. The crucial role played by Gujarati merchants is critical as they were actively involved in the generation of credit and financing the circulation of capital between India and Africa. He recalls the exemplary role played by Laxmichand Motichand, a prominent Vaniya merchant from Gujarat who became a significant contributor in establishing regular contacts between Africa and India. Through empirical evidence the author shows that Vaniya merchants catered to both private and commercial interests, and by the eighteenth century they became prominent financiers and suppliers of credit in the African trade. Vaniyas' ownership and access to independent shipping further enabled them to play a

decisive role. The author substantiates that organisational structures, equipped ships and crews as well as the knowledge of season of sailing ensured their success in the commercial exchange. Challenging the conventional understanding of Indian Ocean as an Islamic space marked by phenomenal participation by Muslims, the book offers evidence to show the vibrant segment of shipping operated by Vaniya as well as other “Hindu” groups.

Establishing the link between the African market consumption and the Indian production and circulation of textiles, the author also highlights the monopoly which Gujarati merchants enjoyed over Europeans and Swahilis, due to the availability of cheap labour and the efficient distribution network. Unlike contemporary scholars who mostly stress the two-dimensional trade network, Machado examines the cultural consumption of cotton textiles in Africa. Taking centre stage, the textiles were not just commodities of consumption but also a currency that was frequently used for exchange of ivory, slaves and other commodities across the Indian Ocean. Further, a variety of social, political and symbolic meanings bestowed on the textile added to its functional value. The critical importance of the textile was instrumental in mediating the trade network, and the Vaniyas were quick enough in adapting to the changing demands despite facing competition from the Portuguese. However, during the nineteenth century, Indian Vaniya merchants did lose their export market in the western Indian Ocean due to the entry of cheap American textiles into the African market as well as increasing participation from another South Asian merchant caste, “Kachchi Bhatiya” from Mandvi region, in the commercial network. The author rightly flags the intricacies of the complex commercial network and its changing contours, as with the beginning of the second half of the eighteenth century there was an increasing demand for African slaves in French sugar plantations leading to a significant increase in the slave trade from Mozambique; the changing commercial environment was facilitated through the use of Gujarati textiles as currency. The Vaniya increasingly participated in slave trade as shippers of slaves as well as the supplier of the vessels; more importantly, merchants like Shobhachand were also involved in extending credit in the form of textiles to slave merchants operating in Mozambique in exchange for Spanish silver. The imported silver played a significant role in binding the exchange network due to increasing demand for silver in local markets of Gujarat, thus facilitating the Vaniyas to earn credit and fund their overseas voyages. Another facet that finds its due mention in the book is the difference in the structural orientation and response of South Asian merchants towards the changing commercial network by Vaniyas during the late eighteenth century, and with the prevailing measures adopted during the late nineteenth century.

Adding to a constructivist understanding of the Indian Ocean, the book offers its readers a fascinating analysis that has often been missed in western historiography. The book makes interesting arguments and exemplifies that the success of Vaniya merchants cannot be attributed to any single factor; rather, there were variety of factors that influenced and ensured their success, as the complex trading system was marked by increasing demand from both African markets for cotton and the Indian consumer for ivory.

The commercial vibrancy and engagements between African markets and the Indian coast can be traced back to time immemorial; however, the author chooses a time frame from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century to explore the changing meaning and scope of the exchange network with the intervention by the Portuguese, European and Omani. The cautious choice of spatial unit and temporal framework by the author works efficiently as it shows the transition of powers under whom the Vaniya operated. However, it tends to overlook the participation of other geographical spaces like Cochin and Bombay. To present a larger view of participation of South Asian merchants, the approach seems to be constricted in its scope as it rules out the contribution of any other merchant caste except “Bhatiyas,” which finds some acknowledgment.

Despite a few failures, the book is a must-read for students and academicians who want to explore the changing contours of the Indian Ocean exchange network. The author does a remarkable job by binding Asian merchants and their interests traversing the European commercial market and linking the local markets to the global economy. Lastly, the elaborative description with exhaustive use of primary sources Machodo offers is quite remarkable, as it sets the ground for further enquiry.

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