

“India in the Indian Ocean Arena: Commerce, Colonialism, Cosmopolitanism”

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Summarized by Timothy Doran

In 1850, a bit north of Point Cabrillo Lighthouse Station on the Pacific Coast of Northern California, the clipper *Frolic* foundered on a reef. The local Pomo Indians were seen a year later wearing Chinese linen and eating from Chinese plates. The previous decade, the *Frolic* had been employed in the Indian Ocean carrying opium. One cannot separate Canton from California, Indian opium from Chinese porcelains.

By contrast with the Atlantic and the Pacific, the Indian Ocean was a center of trade, commerce, and culture. For even an indifferent sailor can work his way up the coast of Africa and across India and south to Sumatra, and favorable trade winds exist to sail to India in summer, and Africa in winter. Thus, one can sail across this ocean, rather than along the coast. The Indian Ocean played a critical role in the dissemination of Islam. It was passed along by peaceful traders who converted their trade contacts. Islam was portable and involved local shrines and ceremonies. Shrines can be replicated, carried for example to Singapore. A counter-movement from the Hajj to Mecca existed too. Piety was focused on the center. Warrior communities went out from Arabia, around the coast of what is now Yemen. They settled in Indonesia. A genuine account of the time is available in the 14th century memoir of Ibn Batuta, a Muslim traveler from the Middle East to Indonesia. The Indian Ocean was comprised and defined by an array of port cities around both arcs of the Ocean from South Africa to Singapore. These cities are all extremely cosmopolitan. Parsees, Goan Christians, Hindus, Muslims, and Zoroastrians traveled to and fro. These coastal cities are almost all colonial cities from the sixteenth century onwards. The fort would manifest the power of the colonial ruler and protect the colonials from hostile folk. And above all, the Indian Ocean was a trading world.

It is essential to separate two periods. The first, circa 1600- 1820, represents the *early modern* world of the Ching Dynasty, Tudors, Ottomans, Mughal Dynasty, and Louis XIV. It was sharply distinct from the second period, 1820 – 1920, which was *colonial and modern*. It is useful to not mix up these categories.

The *early modern* period (1600 – 1820) was defined by a demand for textiles. Coarse white cloth went to Southeast Asia. Dyed goods (“Guinea cloth”) went to West Africa, often to buy slaves. Europeans didn’t capture people, but bought slaves at ports from other Africans. Slaves were taken to West Indies plantations to grow sugar which was brought to England and then to the Indian Ocean. From 1700, fine Indian textiles found ready markets in Britain and Colonial America. “Muslin” and “Calico” come from the names of Indian Ocean ports. These became women’s dress fabrics, kerchiefs, shawls. Cashmere shawls were hugely valued in Europe.

There was little that England or Europe could sell to India: not British woolens, certainly. So this trade had to be financed by local Asian carrying-trade. European ships would carry goods all around the Eastern Indian Ocean. Profit came from the local trade arena. Opium

to China was an instance of this. Shipping bullion was another example of this. The whole world was encompassed in this trade.

Even the Romans had wanted these commodities: Roman coins have been found in South India. After independence, Americans sought to enter this trade too, and sold ice to India.

The second period, the modern colonial period (1820 – 1920) began after the British consolidated their conquest of India after the 1820s and 1830s. The rise of the industrial revolution in Manchester and Massachusetts ended the export of fine textiles from India. Finer cloth could now be shipped *to* India rather than purchased *from* it. India then became a supplier of raw materials such as jute, tea, and raw cotton. This heyday of early modern trade featured competition, rivalry, and pirates. Europeans were present but not dominant. British rule around the double arc of the Indian Ocean encouraged the movement of people and goods and cosmopolitanism in the harbors. Telegraphs and steam trains enhanced trade, travel, and communications. The Indian Ocean was pacified but not indolent. India exported more people now than raw materials and goods. People were recruited indentured labor in 7 – 10 year periods on colonial plantations. From 1830 – 1920, over 1.2 million Indians went to various places: cane, tea, and rubber empires all around the Indian Ocean in Fiji, South Africa, and so forth, and also out to public works projects such as the Uganda railway. Indians provided the labor force and much of the managerial staff. In Mauritius, impoverished peasants seeking an escape from indigo plantations in India were drawn into indentured labor contracts overseas. These laborers were treated and mistreated at sea and on the colonial plantations; but once their indenture was completed, 2/3 to 3/4 of these indentured servants stayed in the places wherein they worked.

When one thinks about the horrors of this trade, one must remember that it ended when the contract expired: at that point, the laborer was free to do what he wanted. Plenty of restrictive legislation and racial categorizing continued, but the workers' families continued to live in these colonies. Over the long run these people improved their situation. Perhaps the potential of a better life outweighs poor treatment for 8-10 years. Fiji was a brutal situation, but Mauritius better. Not only impoverished laborers emigrated. Sikhs, impressive for their height and turbans, were brought out to act as colonial police force in China and Malaysia. Nepali Gurhas, Sikhs, and other Indians conquered much of East Africa and SE Asia *for* the British. It was not easy to enforce British supremacy in the Mopar of East Africa. The "mad mullah of Somaliland" threatened the British hold over the Somali coast and in his elusiveness bore some relation to Osama Bin Laden. The British mounted several expeditions to capture him. In 1904, 3,650-man Indian force dispersed his soldiers.

When East Africa was first conquered, several British officials had a vision of East Africa as an America for the Hindus, where Hindus could move, settle, and flourish under British rule. Harry Johnston in Uganda said "unhappily, it is the richest portion of East Africa that should be open." It was not easy to accomplish. White racism had curtailed Indian migration to South Africa. That racial attitude spread to East Africa as well, parts of which were reserved for whites, other parts within which Indians were permitted, but were considered inferior to whites.

From 1914 the imperial trading world declined. Partly this was because of the Great War and the Depression. Indian nationalism found indentured servitude degrading. Gaining

independence became more important than improving one's individual fortune. Britain's economy and military fortunes declined in the interwar years. The depression of the 1930s reached India, inaugurated a period of intense nationalism, and cut down trade contacts. The fall of Singapore was the *coup de grace* of the Indian Ocean system. Under Nehru, India was still committed to nationalism, socialism, and self-sufficiency. Only recently is there visible any return to the cosmopolitan system that was so vibrant in the imperial period.

An ocean is of course just a lot of water. But for the most part what matters is what people do, along the littoral. The Indian Ocean and its empires created an inter-knit cosmopolitan world like none other. The Indian Ocean is far from California, but as the *Frolic* episode shows us, we are not so far from it.

One audience member says that Professor Metcalf's pointing out the benefits from imperialism and from being colonized is dangerous and misleading. Metcalf responded that there are different ways of looking at imperialism, and that the rational interests of individuals must be examined, and finishes by saying "Going around condemning it makes you feel good, but does it help you understand what happened?"