

Global trade and circulations in the Northern Bay of Bengal

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In 2004, the '10 Truck Arms and Ammunition Haul' in Chittagong exposed the smuggling activities between the Bay of Bengal and North East India. The similitudes with the earliest case of weapon smuggling reported by the British administration during the mid-nineteenth century is telling of the continuity of circulations outlawed by changing political and economic regimes, in the shadow of both states' borders and international agencies' interventions. Trade from South West China to the India Ocean, Nicobar and Maldives islands and further, has always been part of the social and cultural fabric of the Northern Bay of Bengal (NBB). Vernacular songs, stories, architecture, food and dress, lifestyles and languages, are witness to mutual and multiple borrowings, in which circulation has played a central role.



Above: Fishing boats south of Cox's Bazar. (c) Nazir Uddin Mahmud Liton.

Circulation against borders

Falling in line with, or in reaction against, the contemporary political situation, scholarship concealed those legacies of circulation, reinforcing the political discourse of ethno-nationalism. Focusing on transport technology and mobility, forced and free, allows us to look across and beyond present political borders and periodization. Those are a precondition to study the active participation of a space, in the Braudelian sense, in the making of world-systems. Rather than marginal, the Northern Bay of Bengal appeared as a multi-centered space where various levels of negotiations and intermediations took place, triggering a dense knowledge network of connected segments with loose and changing, but compatible ends. The study of mobility and exchange in the NBB draws a continuum of multi directional circulation, branching out and in, cutting across topography and polities, dotted with disputed nodes, often at the intersection of rivers or waterways and land itineraries, rather than linear routes and borders drawing orderly cells clearly delineated with repelling edges.

The design and implementation of linear borders in the NBB was complemented by a cadastral land regime and social engineering via the census in British India-Burma. It ascribed a non-sustainable fixity and monolith identity to both land and people. These aspects have been scrutinized, documented and theorized in an expanding academic corpus. The role of circulation linking the hilly regions to the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean, allows a wider reading beyond the ethno-nationalist discourse.

Roadless tracks

In 1915, after the Abhor expedition, Sidney Gerald Burrard, former surveyor general for India, wrote: "The Karakoram and the Hindu Kush have presented great difficulties to earlier surveyors and their forms have only been represented on maps by field workers after much hardship and privation. But in some ways the mountains of the North-East Frontier are more difficult than those of the North-West. They are pathless, tractless and covered in places by thick jungle."¹

Portuguese cartographer Pedro Reinel published a portulan map of the African coast

(c.1517), the Red Sea, Sri Lanka Indonesia, and the southern tip of the Malaysian peninsula, north and south of Malacca. The coastline of the Bay of Bengal remained outlined, bare of any mention of ports. Six years earlier the Portuguese Estado da India seized Malacca and started sending expeditions to Bengal to ensure the continuance of rice supply for their newly conquered emporium. Bengal supplied rice across South Asia, but also to the main emporium between the Bay of Bengal and further east to the islands of Sunda and even the Moluccas. The ships set sail from Chittagong, called Porto Grande by the Portuguese. After his visit in 1606, Pyrard de Laval considered Chittagong to be the wealthiest port of the Orient. The dresses of its inhabitants tell about a highly affluent lifestyle. During the seventeenth century, duties were estimated to amount to a third of the value of the goods entering Bengal, largely compensated by the profits to be made.

Studies of trade in Bengal focused on the Ganga, underrating or bypassing the one which transited from the Brahmaputra-Meghna river system, and the Karnaphuli. The former is well documented (vernacular, Persian and European sources). The latter is known indirectly, but drew a very important volume of the trade from the kingdoms of the Himalayan regions, the foothills and the adjacent plains. In the early years of the 16th century, Thomas Pires noted that the rich kingdoms inland such as Tripura, Koch and Assam depended on Bengal as an outlet for their goods. Tibbetts' study of pre-European Arab, Persian and Turkish navigational treaties in the Indian Ocean highlighted the precise mapping of the coast from Coromandel to Bengal in contrast to the one from Chittagong to Pegu, the trade between these two areas being possibly left to local mariners.²

The eastern part of the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna river system remained vaguely depicted in European cartography. Well into the eighteenth century, the convergence of the main South East Asian rivers and the Lohit-Zayu (still considered by upper Assam's communities as the main tributary of the Brahmaputra) remained symbolized by a mythical Chianmay lake. It sat in the eastern edge of the Himalaya, in a manner of an eastern twin to the Mansarovar lake.

Topography: the impossible anthropocene?

Trade and exchanges in the NBB took place via roadless networks, whose access was conditioned by freezing winters in the mountains, flooding rains during the monsoon with rivers at times shifting a few kilometers off course, but also by shallow coastal waters crossed by hundreds of rivulets and channels. The topography was subject to extreme seasonal variations. The trading networks linking South West China, Himalayas, Upper Burma, Arakan, North, East and North East India to the Indian Ocean, moved through seasonally accessible passes, changing waterways, and monsoon dominated sea voyages.

Every year waterways and paths needed to be renegotiated. Riverine, estuary and coastal forms of transportation required specific technologies adapted to shallow draft and strong currents, relying on detailed knowledge of the topography, currents and wind. This scenario gave an edge to local polities and freebooters who could easily escape via the innumerable creeks, rivers and channels thanks to swift shallow draft vessels capable of landing directly on the beaches.

While traveling from Bengal to Central Tibet via Assam and Bhutan, Estêvão Cacela writes in 1627: "There are sixty and more of those (choquis or duty station) on those rivers up to Azó (Hajo). The journey went on by the Ganges' arms, very fresh and very pleasant, of excellent water, and lined with countless villages, where everything abounds. Azó is the main city and the capital of the kingdoms of Cocho, wide countries very populated and very rich". The plains and large valleys were seats of powerful and often warring states such as the Ahom, Arakan, Tripura or Manipur kingdoms. Their control over the territory followed the mandala pattern rather than linear borders, and was limited by densely forested steep hills, the marshlands, and water bodies. The NBB remained mostly on the edges of the expanding empires. The kingdoms of the plains entertained alliances with smaller and competing chiefdoms of the hills, which controlled the passes connecting one valley to another. The most contested area of the NBB remained Chittagong, and its strategic

estuarine interface between the land and the sea. While seizing the city was a challenge, control over the territory around the port city, crisscrossed by multiple channels, hills, islands and creeks, was next to impossible.

Overlapping circulation regime

After the East India Company gained administrative powers over provinces of Bengal, a gigantic tax evasion set in, using an advantageous interpretation of trading agreements. During the nineteenth century, the development of steel shipbuilding started to make up for timber's scarcity. Insurance companies also favored steel over wood. Vernacular ships were decommissioned, only to almost immediately resurface as a smuggling medium in networks still linking the interiors of the Patkai Hills with the Bay of Bengal, further down to the Andaman seas, and even to the Chao Phraya delta.³

The fleet of shallow draft vessels with the capacity to sail along the coast, up estuaries, and to land directly on the beaches, retained their advantage. They played a pivotal role both in the domestic economy, particularly for fishing, and in networks still active in the NBB: cross-border exchanges where drugs, weapons and human trade assumed significant dimensions.

The slave trade in Arakan, Bengal and Manipur originates from at least the early seventeenth century, reflected in folk literature and culture. The new focus on land routes, including corridor policies such as the Belt Road Initiative, and the geo-political instability on the Bangladesh-Burma border, have favored its revival. Human trafficking operates using wooden trawlers and according to patterns of circulation established earlier than shipping lines. Prior to the latest Rohingya crisis, around fifty thousand people were believed to be trafficked every year just from the South-East Bengal coast alone, mainly between Cox's Bazar and Teknaf, towards Thailand. Shadow corridors appear as the continuation of former circulations in a new political and economic regime.

In the context of corridor projects such as the BRI, the history of mobility and circulations sheds a different light on coastal regions and supposedly landlocked regions between South West China and the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna delta. In 2002, Van Schendel highlighted the consequences of the geographical divide, bringing forth the concept of *zomia* in reference to regions at the intersection of East, South and South East Asia.⁴ He demonstrated how regions at the intersection of those area studies, almost all of which fall in the NBB, fell into oblivion. The next step is to bridge the periodization divide. The various cycles shaping the topography, the corresponding vernacular transport technologies, and changes in the political economy in the NBB, draw a nonlinear and non-sequential history, underlining the co-substantiality of early modern, modern and contemporary history.

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Notes

- 1 Burrard, S.G. 1915. 'The Identity of the Sanpo and Dihang Rivers', *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* 47(4):259-264, see p.259; www.jstor.org/stable/201464
- 2 Tibbetts, G.R. 1971. *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean before the Coming of the Portuguese*. Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, p.470.
- 3 Dzuvichu, L. 2010. "Opening up the Hills?" *The Politics of Access along the Northeast Frontier of British India, 1866-1942*, PhD thesis, Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University.
- 4 van Schendel, W. 2002. 'Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia', *Development and Planning D: Society and Space* 20:647-668, see p.652.