Recentering the Bay of Bengal

Connected spaces in an inter-Asian bordersea

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The interconnected world history of the Bay of Bengal is re-enacted in people’s memories, habits and everyday practices. The word for 'star anise' in Central India is Singapoor ke phool [Singapore flower], a colloquial echo of a pre-modern network of maritime trade. The Bengali word for window [janala] is directly borrowed from Portuguese, a reminder that language witnessed the syncretic impact of early European settlements around the Bay. Epic stories from the Ramayana, originating in ancient India, are re-enacted daily in Javanese traditional theatre. These are just a few of the examples that can serve as metaphorical mappings of the past and present of a network of interdependent livelihoods, a busy seascape, and a web of littoral hubs, which constitute the life of the Bay of Bengal.

The Bay of Bengal, a web of maritime highways as well as a chessboard of relationships and mobilities, is a vital region for several countries; both littoral (India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Thailand) and landlocked (Nepal, Bhutan, China, Northeast India, Nepal). Often disregarded as the periphery and the liquid borderland between South Asia and Southeast Asia – two macro areas that came to define much of the modern scholarship about this region – the Bay of Bengal can be seen as the nodal crossroad and the cultural hub for a network of exchanges and contacts of diverse kinds.

In the new millennium, the Bay has emerged as a significant subject of debate in popular as well as academic discourses, particularly with rising sea levels, and attention to maritime trajectories in policy approaches of different Asian states in and around the region. This waterscape has been characterized by an absence of any major territorial conflicts or claims; perhaps one of the reasons for traditionally receiving less attention – in the larger realm of Indian Ocean studies – than the western Indian Ocean region. Yet, the eastern Indian Ocean has been one of the busiest seascapes, with overlapping circuits of interaction between the regional nodes of exchanges and the global economic order. The ‘monsoon winds’ established and connected the dominant trade routes and shaped migratory trends till the onset of colonial intervention and consequent introduction of steamship navigation. European trading settlements, experiments and ambitions, left a trace of Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, French, British and other presences. A successive period of colonial intrusion and governance both separated and united communities, commodities, cultures and ideas across the region. The hegemonic (British) colonial domination over the seascape and adjoining hinterlands and littorals was often achieved through destruction and violence. Yet, administrative subjugation also generated a sense of unity in the Bay. This complex area has thus witnessed multiple and mutual borrowings across the seas, littorals and borders, with strong legacies of circulations in culture, economy, life-style and languages.

However, porous borders and circular migrations slowly turned into isolationism and rigidly monitored frontiers in post-colonial Asia, with the emergence of decolonized geopolitical territories, the dominance of nation-centric visions and inward-looking policies for most of the states around the rim of the Bay. Borderlands and borders were divided into South and Southeast Asian states, a binary conception that became deeply embedded in academic, political, and public discourses. It is only recently that increasing globalization and inter-state interactions have facilitated looking beyond the conventional categories sanctioned by the history of Area Studies. The Bay of Bengal thus emerges as an incredibly fertile field of inquiry as an in-between space of borrowings, contacts and interactions that shape the vision of the past, the present and the future of a considerable part of the global population. Moreover, the increasing importance of borders, borderlands and trans-border studies in academic discussions has often laid more emphasis on mainland ‘barbed-wire borders’ rather than on maritime borders, shared maritime heritages, and the hydroscapes of bordering regions, pointing to another lacuna that our focus on the Bay of Bengal region aims to fill.

Continued overleaf
A new phase of Bay of Bengal studies: economic and cultural contexts beyond geopolitical strategy

This Focus section of The Newsletter has been inspired by the need to emphasize the spaces and trajectories between the two macro areas of South and Southeast Asia, strongly embedded in popular imagination and academic discourses. Transcending methodological nationalism, it focuses on transnational and transregional movements, practices and institutions that connect people, histories and knowledge across the Bay. For example, present-day impermeable borders and nationalist rhetoric in countries like Burma and Bangladesh are better understood if compared to a long history of exchanges and colonial connections between the historical province of unified Bengal and British Burma. Contemporary academic discussions in contemporary Myanmar, which strives to identify members of the Rakhine community as ‘Bangalis’ or foreign infiltrators, making way for a tragic humanitarian crisis, nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries history of the Bay of Bengal demonstrates that the two regions were linked through common movements of residence, intellectually constructed pan-Asian sentiments, but also mutually influenced by anti-colonial political activists.

Whereas mainstream popular discourses depict the Bay of Bengal as a strategic area both at the convergence of two geo-political blocks (ASEAN and SAARC) and at the confluence of two competing maritime powers (India and China), this special Focus considers not only the high politics but also the everyday lives of the Bay of Bengal. The Bay of Bengal is a place where gatherings by researchers from perspectives across the historical, anthropological, sociological, literary and multidisciplinary research. The nine contributions by scholars from different disciplines and geographies are based on the discussions held at a day-long intensive roundtable session at the International Conference of Asian Scholars (ICAS) in Leiden, on 18 July 2019.

The roundtable titled ‘The Bay of Bengal: Perspectives across Disciplines’, was divided into four different thematic clusters (‘Cosmopolitan Connections’, ‘Contested Heritage and Politics’, ‘Life and Migration and Solid Borders’ and ‘Environment and Littoral Ecologies’) and featured fifteen participants from different parts of the globe, along with an enthusiastic international audience. The discussions consciously looked beyond discussions of mainstream geopolitics that dominate the mediated discourse around the eastern Indian Ocean. The participants focused instead on historicizing, and examining, the participant’s experiences with historical, anthropological, sociological, literary and multidisciplinary research.

Far from homogeneity, the Bay of Bengal landscape is a mosaic of different cultures, different languages, different ways of living, and different histories. People, through their daily actions, have created the Bay of Bengal landscape. It is the Bay of Bengal that has shaped the people, and the people that have shaped the Bay of Bengal. The Bay of Bengal is a place where cultures, both dominant and minority, meet and interact. The Bay of Bengal is a place where history is lived, and history is lived in the Bay of Bengal.

The presenters analyzed travel narratives, and oral and written accounts of traveling to the Bay of Bengal. They showed how narratives of travel and migration have been instrumental in shaping the perceptions of the Bay of Bengal. The contributions in this Focus remind us that the northern Bay, spreading from the unique ecological reality of the Bengal Delta seamlessly into the Indian Ocean, is a space that challenges established notions of water, land, soil and sea. Whereas disciplines at the service of the Empire, such as cartography and oceanography, have striven to separate navigable sea from taxable land, the Bengal Delta defies these binary notions through its tidal landscapes, its ubiquitous ponds, swamps and wetlands, its mangrove landscapes, and its wetlands. The deltaic landscape, with its wetlands, has also been shaped by the powerful forces of the sea, such as tsunamis, hurricanes, and cyclones.

The contributions in this Focus also remind us that the Bay of Bengal is not a place where history is passed down from one generation to the next. The Bay of Bengal is a place where history is lived, and history is lived in the Bay of Bengal. The Bay of Bengal is a place where cultures, both dominant and minority, meet and interact. The Bay of Bengal is a place where history is lived, and history is lived in the Bay of Bengal.

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Besides migrations and connections, the history of the Bay of Bengal is also a history of nature’s cycles and land-water interactions. The 2004 tsunami, for example, acts as a watershed in the history of the Andaman and Nicobar islands and erodes the coasts and landfill, leading to a shift in the transformation of the Bay of Bengal as an international borderland. The tsunami has also been inspired by the need to emphasize the spaces and trajectories between the two macro areas of South and Southeast Asia, strongly embedded in popular imagination and academic discourses. Transcending methodological nationalism, it focuses on transnational and transregional movements, practices and institutions that connect people, histories and knowledge across the Bay. For example, present-day impermeable borders and nationalist rhetoric in countries like Burma and Bangladesh are better understood if compared to a long history of exchanges and colonial connections between the historical province of unified Bengal and British Burma. Contemporary academic discussions in contemporary Myanmar, which strives to identify members of the Rakhine community as ‘Bangalis’ or foreign infiltrators, making way for a tragic humanitarian crisis, nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries history of the Bay of Bengal demonstrates that the two regions were linked through common movements of residence, intellectually constructed pan-Asian sentiments, but also mutually influenced by anti-colonial political activists.

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Cosmopolitan connections, liquid borders, and endangered livelihoods

Looking at the history of communication, transportation and connectivity across the Bay, our contributors highlight a past of mobility, mobility with elite travelers, nationalists, intellectual classes, colonial proto-tourists, and upper-class local inhabitants, as well as waves of settlement and migration into the modern and early-modern Bay was also populated by subaltern migrants and pilgrims. This long history of subaltern migration connects the past to the present. For example, some of the contributors follow the history of migration and resettlement of indentured laborers and post-Partition refugees from mainland South Asia to the Andaman Islands.

In this Focus

The articles of the Indian historians Sonali Mishra and Smarika Nawani look at the early–colonial life of port cities around the Bay, and the ways in which the Europeans, Asians and several indigenous merchants engaged. Their opportunities transcended normative categories based on caste, religion, ethnicity and political belonging. She argues that this relative
freedom in the complex socio-political milieu of the region, requires us to re-evaluate the manner in which we understand the pre-modern state in South Asia. Smrakowska Nawami’s contribution focuses instead on the Portuguese presence around the Bay and its implications on long-lasting cultural and linguistic influences, and on the town of Mylapore, a cultural heart of Hindu temple culture in the colonial period.

Both articles highlight examples of cosmopolitanism and inclusive living of different religious communities and their interactions across the Bay of Bengal. The essence of similar co-existence continued into the colonial phase, particularly in the port cities around the rim of the Bay, like Penang, Singapore, Calcutta, Madras, Akyab, Rangoon, and Colombo.

With the territorial establishment of the East India Company and the Dutch VOC in South Asia and Southeast Asia, respectively, the disruptions to the existing trading dynamics caused by the establishment of new ports and the addition of trade in new goods increased the need for navigational help. This led to the creation of nautical directories that highlighted the importance of the region as a hub for trade and commerce. The presence of lighthouses and other coastal markers and structures that connected the coast with communities living inland, while functioning as visible markers and recipients of devotion, underscored the need for such directories.


The relevance and future avenues of Bay of Bengal studies

The articles in this Focus contribute to the understanding of the history, the socio-cultural ecologies, and the geopolitical interactions across the Bay, by adding complexity and texture to the public discourse around the strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal. The contributors also seek to de-center notions of transnational flows, and bring up instances of disconnections, disruptions, and unequal mobilities within and across the Bay. Avant-garde scholarship on the Bay of Bengal has already established that the Bay was never a static region, nor an impenetrable web of political boundaries, but interactions and power dynamics across the Bay in different time-periods played out in multifarious manners.

Keeping in view the significance of the region and tremendous possibilities of research, we established a network of scholars from diverse disciplines across the humanities and social sciences. The contributions and discussions at the roundtable sessions during ICAS 11, this Focus in The Newsletter is the first concrete step in this direction of research, see Bose, S. 2006. The Winds of Change: Buddhism and the Making of Early Southeast Asia. Harvard University Press; Rangoon and Colombo, giving way to Chittagong in 1903–1904. Special issue on ‘Asian Borderlands’, 39:2, 481-499. Available scholarship on the region has influenced future pedagogical frameworks.

Notes


2. For a broad view of connectivity, see Bose, S. 2006. The Winds of Change: Buddhism and the Making of Early Southeast Asia. Cambridge University Press; Rangon and Colombo, connecting the eastern section of the Bay of Bengal in the contemporary political-economic order. The increasing interest of the nations-states in the maritime resources of the Bay has added another dimension to the competition and collaboration, adding to the vulnerability of marginal people and delicate ecosystems. At an important juncture of history, when we are moving beyond strictures and demarcations of Area Studies, this platform seeks to open up new avenues to explore transregional issues, cosmoportolan linkages and heritage, communities and cultural traditions. It also attempts to address the concerns of a post-disciplinary academia, encouraging inter-disciplinary research and influencing future pedagogical frameworks.