In the physical seascape of the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal is an enclosed region nested between the ports of Nagapattinam and Aceh, historically lacking good harbours and anchoring spots. The hydrospace of the Bay includes and connects different bodies of water, such as Coranga and Combermere Bay, Andaman Sea, Gulf of Martaban, straits such as Cheduba, deltas of the Krishna, Godavari, Ganga-Brahmaputra and Irrawaddy rivers, and freshwater lakes like Pulicat and Chilika. Its long coastline is interrupted, among others, by mangrove forests in the north, and the Mergui archipelago and other islands to the east. Tropical cyclones periodically destroy its coastal habitats, yet various littoral communities resist, re-build and carry on with their socio-economic activities. Such aspects of continuity in the history of the Bay are well marked in observations and imagery of various travellers who moved across it. Between the 16th and 18th centuries, such narrations were often observed in the writings of Tomé Pires, Duarte Barbosa, Varthema, Nicholas Pimenta, Linschoten, Peter Floris, Thomas Bowrey and others. With its restrictive natural conditions for sailing and harbouring, the Bay established itself as a distinct region throughout history.

Notes

7 The small town of Mylapore also known as its capital, and had credited it with being a ‘Portuguese’. The Portuguese presence in the Bay of Bengal underwent transitions and changes which were externally conditioned, while at the same time, they moved across the Bay, with age-old practices which can be noticed through the ever-growing importance of Mylapore, itself of plantations and deeply felt transformations since at least the 16th century.

View of Fort St. George by Thomas and William Daniell painted in 1797. Source: British Library, Online gallery, Open access

The Portuguese of the Bay

These historical sources can also help us to observe the changing character of the Portuguese demographic around the Bay. It was not only composed of run-away functionaries and soldiers who had moved from Europe, but also increasingly comprised of the mixed ‘Eurasian’ population (mestizos), as well as the newly converted Indigenous Christian population of the Bay. Religious and quasi-religious institutions like Bishoprics and Santo Cura da Missinha, which had helped the Estado to connect with the Portuguese of the Bay, as well as different missionaries, also played an important role in furthering indirect Portuguese interests in the world of the Bay. They became the guiding light of the emerging Catholic community around the region. It is in this context that Mylapore, a place related with the martyrdom of St. Thomas, assumed importance and became the radial nerve of the Bay. The small town of Mylapore was also known for textiles, but had no harbour. Yet, it controlled the Bay in the 17th century and beyond, as far as political, commercial as well as religious aspects were concerned. The shrine of St. Thomas bonded the region’s Catholic Christian population with the rest of the believers who sought protection from the furious winds and rough waters of the Bay. The testimonies of Linschoten and Nicholas Pimenta record the same. Mylapore continued to enjoy the same aura even after it had reeled under Dutch and later French control. As late as the 19th century, Mylapore continued to be the cultural capital of Catholics in the Bay. In virtually every area where the Portuguese diaspora moved and settled, they carried their traditions and their reverence for St. Thomas, and eagerness to visit his shrine never died off. Despite the Portuguese transitions, continuities in terms of religious practices carried on. Ever since the 16th century, the Portuguese of the Bay had been treated differently by Goan when compared to those in the formal settlements of the Estado. However, they maintained a strong affiliation with Goa. It was a question of identity for the ones who were located in the Bay. Associating with Goa provided the feeling of a community and the sense of being ‘Portuguese’. The Portuguese presence in the Bay of Bengal underwent transitions and changes which were externally conditioned, while at the same time, they moved across the Bay, with age-old practices which can be noticed through the ever-growing importance of Mylapore, itself of plantations and deeply felt transformations since at least the 16th century.

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