Reimagining the Littoral through Development Regimes and Local Contingencies

This collection unpacks the multiple trajectories of coastal transformations in the past and the present, with a focus on the different claims made by state and non-state actors to naturalize the coast as a space of flows for greater connectivity, economic growth, and future prosperity.

A Bridge over Ancient Waters
Devika Shankar

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eparating India and Sri Lanka, the shallow waters around the Palk Strait are perhaps best known for a chain of shoals that have featured prominently in geological writings and religious traditions. As a result, technological interventions around this strategically important region have had to grapple, time and again, with the cultural dimensions of these shoals. If the perceived sanctity of these shoals has appeared to facilitate technological interventions, Bennett argues, the shoals have been associated with multiple layers of cultural symbols, forms of resistance, and Author: Edyta Roszko

Chinese fishers, African fishers and traders, Kutch coastal dwellers, and South Indian artisanal and mechanized fishers—appropriate, context, and co-produce imaginaries of development and, in the process, make the coastal space legible for themselves.

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Notes
1. ‘Plan to Cut a Channel for Ships between India and Ceylon’, April 26th 1871, The Times of India.
2. ‘Plan to Cut a Channel for Ships between India and Ceylon’, April 26th 1871, The Times of India.
3. The Harbour of Colombo, Ceylon and a Railway to Connect Southern India with Colombo, A. M. and J. Ferguson, 1897

Through the course of the late 19th century, however, as Ceylon’s booming tea industry increasingly began to depend on the migration of indentured labor from southern India, the colonial state became less interested in deepening the divide between India and Ceylon. Instead, it

began to explore ways to bridge the physical distance between the two through the construction of ‘a railway line over the sea.’ From its inception, those lobbying for a connection between the proposed railway bridge and the limestone formations, known as Adam’s Bridge, that had been considered hindrances to navigation. The bridge would be partly built on the shores themselves, and legends surrounding these formations would also help draw investments toward the project. While Adam’s Bridge appears in Islamic and Buddhist accounts as well, its apparent associations with the bridge in the Hindu epic the Ramayana would gain prominence in this process. A number of news reports began their analysis of the proposed bridge by recalling the episode in the epic where Hanuman, the monkey god, builds a bridge across the Palk Strait to rescue Sita. When a part-ferry, part-railway line was ultimately inaugurated in 1914, colonial officials similarly used the occasion to emphasize the bridge’s mythical past, quoting passages from the Ramayana and assuming the names of characters from the epic. With the opening of this line, senior officials proclaimed, history was now following in the footsteps of mythology.

Though the bridge was only partly completed and the railway line never quite became the grand success that its promoters had envisioned, these invocations of mythology would have far-reaching consequences. For instance, when the Indian government began to revise plans for a shipping channel through this very area in the final decades of the 20th century, some Hindu groups rose in protest, insisting that the shoals were inviolable due to their associations with the ancient bridge mentioned in the Ramayana. A century earlier, that tradition had been narrated repeatedly in order to facilitate a colonial public works project by endowing it with much-needed grandeur. In the hands of 21st-century Hindu nationalists, it turned into a historical fact that would serve to prevent further infrastructural interventions. The line between fact and fable, which had begun to dissolve in the first quarter of the 20th century under colonial rule, has collapsed in recent years, to such an extent that in 2017 the Indian Council of Historical Research agreed to conduct archaeological excavations to investigate whether the shoals are indeed man-made structures. In the meantime, all plans to construct a shipping channel by dredging these shallow waters have been abandoned.

The pivotal position occupied by the Palk Strait as a possible bridge between India and Sri Lanka, but also as a central node between western and eastern Asia, demonstrates the multiple ways in which transnational and regional linkages have been both imagined and executed historically. At the same time, the recurrent invocations of mythology to both enable and disable infrastructural interventions in this region at different points of time highlight the extent to which local contingencies have shaped this process in particular ways.

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Bumpy land-water spaces have long generated fiery contests along the South Asian coastline, unsettling and reconfiguring the very definition of the coast. I focus on one such contest in the Gulf of Kutch, Western India, against the Arabian Sea, where India’s largest private port has been under construction since the 1990s. Celebrators of the port project regard it as a boon for high-tech port building, a beacon for India’s entry into the 21st century. Opponents present the mega-port as activating rampant destruction of the Indian coastline, as representing an industrialized noise around India’s neck. The Gulf of Kutch has served as a prominent theater of contest between nature conservation, small livelihoods, and mega-development.

The multi-commodity port project stretches over 40,000 ha. Such vast tracts of coastal land are utilized for oil tankers, warehouses, containers, and a whole host of logistical operations to handle gigantic volumes of trade. Government-led cartographic efforts to designate coastal land as “wasteland” therefore, have been crucial to the creation of the port enclave. A spectacular intertidal zone has been classified as government wasteland. This unique zone stretches five kilometers from sea into land. During the maximum high tide, seacow comes five kilometers wired, creating unique intertidal area. The state government maps it as swampy and dirty. But the same intertidal area also hosts India’s second largest mangroves, which are breeding grounds for fish, fodder for livestock, and fuelwood for coastal dwellers. Beyond this intertidal area, stretches with seasonal vegetation—where goats, sheep, and cattle graze—are also classified as government wasteland. Such legal and geographic classification of the coast as wasteland visually erases diverse lives and livelihoods. It makes possible the port project for the mega-port. Project developers are thus able to justify their existence on the grounds that the port is productively displacing degraded wasted spaces—wetty intertidal areas as well as dry areas—into a thriving hub of global international trade. Thus, since the very beginning of the port project, local coastal dwellers have experienced how the port project dispossess the resources of the land and mediate industry’s appropriation of land.

It is no wonder, then, that after 20 years of living with these transformations, the dwellers are suspicious of government activities to officially represent the coast. As recently as August 2018, the government was attempting to repave the Kutch coastline. An important part of this repaving was holding a public consultation with stakeholders who were directly impacted by coast remapping. The goal was to fix the boundaries between different spatial units of the coast. Government officials swooped into Kutch to hold a meeting with the coastal dwellers to confirm whether the provisional maps they created matched local visions of the coast. In this public meeting, the range of coastal dwellers—fishers, farmers, livestock keepers—came together to challenge state-led bureaucratic categorizations of coast.

They were outraged by the reductive representation offered of the coast in the provisional government maps—the reduction of dense mangrove clusters to fixed lines, the reduction of the coast to swamp. “You’ve showed the mangroves in a line, like people standing in line and waiting for a public toilet!” exclaimed an elderly livestock keeper. “You’ve marked the full coast as swamp, not all of it is swampy!” argued another farmer. For them, the coast was much more than the intertidal area for fish and marine animals. It included habitats for sparrows, trees, seeds, and roses. They demanded the inclusion of these organisms within the official representation. Furthermore, they challenged how the government had represented fishers’ natural landing places—spaces where fishers parked their boats. Whereas the government sought to fit the fishers’ landing places through tiny red dots in the intertidal zone, the fishers argued that landing places exceeded their confinements to the red dots. These places changed even across the season, with winds and waves. In collective local imagination, wetty intertidal areas that were leveled and reclaimed for port development between 1996-2012 refused unused eras from formal maps.

The dwellers thus articulated an organic, dynamic, and holistic understanding of the coast, against state attempts to narrow it into a static strip of land against sea. Weaving together a vibrant community of human and nonhuman beings, the local coastal imaginaries come together momentarily to show that the coast is greater than the sum of its parts, and although the port has radically transformed coastal life, coastal death is not preordained.

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4. Us couchant, which targets pelagic species.
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When responding to a question – “Do you think the Chinese presence in the Gambian fisheries industry is positive or negative?” – local informants provided varying answers. Whilst a local vessel captain praised that “the Chinese [...] are giving us many opportunities to make more money,” a long-time fish dealer rebutted him categorically by stating that “small market weights endanger the sea but also alienates the people-centred perspective on distant water fisheries in Madagascar, endorsed by the investment of 2.7 billion USD from China into geopolitical impact. In 2018, a 10-year deal was called off eventually, but it raises an acute question about Chinese fisheries’ interest in the current state-centred perspective to a geopolitics of the state, thereby complicating the ocean network without much involvement with Africa within a timeless and placeless spatial realm, depriving the African coastal actors of agency.

The fishing sector accounts for two percent of Africa’s GDP, with numbers going up to 13.5 percent in the case of Senegal. In the past decade the region has witnessed a rapid expansion of Chinese activity: 89 Chinese vessels (out of 153 total foreign vessels) are authorized to fish in Guinean Bissau waters. Granting Chinese and other foreign players access to fishing grounds was never a simple economic proposition. It takes on geopolitical significance and embodies the different constellations of African political leaders that deserves discussion is whether the growing competition for fisheries’ resources equipped the coastal African countries with greater bargaining power and independent decision-making to forge agreements with foreign actors? Here, any understanding of agency needs to be further unpacked to examine whether these agreement negotiations served only state power interests or whether they were instrumentalyzed to introduce developmental transformations in the fishing sector. This is a particularly relevant question to pose as China’s effort to access fishing resources often included the provision of other coastal or fishing-related infrastructures, such as the construction of the Alto da Bandim fishing port in Bissau.

At the other end of the spectrum of African agents are the local fishery actors, including fishermen, fisherwomen, traders, vendors, and agents operating in ports and on-shore markets. These people are among the first to face the direct consequences of the resources crunch due to the growth of foreign industrial fishing. While it would be simplistic to assume that the relationship between artisanal and industrial fishers is naturally conflictual with binary representation of industrial “pirates,” such characterizations continue to dominate current narratives of the Chinese DWF in West Africa. Unfortunately, this position prevents us from developing an empirically-grounded understanding of the manner in which local fishery actors interact, negotiate, and cope with the Chinese fleets. Instead of ascribing the “victim” identity to local fishes, this article argues that it is worthwhile to explore the human and social dimensions of conflicts and collaboration between Chinese industrial fleets and small-scale fishes in coastal West African countries. Particular attention should be given to the agency of the latter as they learn to live with the former, both at sea and on land. The production of catch by Chinese fleets depends upon the participation of local business partners and laborers on boats (often themselves with fishing experience); yet little is known about who these workers are and what their motivations and experiences are of working on Chinese fleets. Adverse weather conditions and the need for daily supplies also force the Chinese fleets to dock sometimes at local harbors. We again know surprisingly little about the socioeconomic interactions between local fishery communities and Chinese crew members on the shore. Do the latter seek to secure a minimum level of social acceptance from coastal hosts? Has their presence created any economic and material benefits for coastal communities, and if so, how are they structured and distributed? The degree of reception and patterns of interaction are unlikely to be solely dictated by the Chinese side of the equation. The local market’s conditions, including, at the very least, power, gender, and socioeconomic dynamics in West Africa.

References

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7. This work was supported by funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 802223 Transoceanic Fishers: Multiple Mobilities in and out of the South China Sea – TransOcean–ERC-2018–SIO).