A Hundred Horizons
THE INDIAN OCEAN IN THE
AGE OF GLOBAL EMPIRE

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Contents

Preface  ix

1 Space and Time on the Indian Ocean Rim  1

2 The Gulf between Precolonial and Colonial Empires  36

3 Flows of Capitalists, Laborers, and Commodities  72

4 Waging War for King and Country  122

5 Expatriate Patriots: Anticolonial Imagination and Action  148

6 Pilgrims’ Progress under Colonial Rules  193

7 A Different Universalism? Oceanic Voyages of a Poet as Pilgrim  233

Conclusion: The Indian Ocean Arena in the History of Globalization  272

Notes  285

Index  315
On December 26, 2004, giant tsunami waves triggered by a magnitude 9.0 earthquake off the northwest coast of Sumatra devastated communities around the Indian Ocean rim. The quake at the interface between the India and Burma tectonic plates lifted up the sea floor in its vicinity by several meters. A massive displacement of water above the sea floor generated the tsunami that swept westward across the Indian Ocean as far as the east coast of Africa, wreaking havoc in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Somalia, Maldives, Malaysia, Myanmar, Tanzania, Bangladesh, and Kenya. It left a staggering death toll of over 200,000 and destroyed the livelihoods of many more victims. The tsunami took about half an hour to reach the Indonesian island of Sumatra and crashed into Thailand in less than two hours. It traveled the approximately two thousand kilometers to Sri Lanka and the southeast coast of India in less than three hours and was pounding the coast of East Africa, some five thousand kilometers away, within seven
hours.' The unity of the Indian Ocean world had been demonstrated in the most tragic fashion by a great wall of water moving at the speed of a jet aircraft.

A tsunami, the Japanese word for "harbor wave," is unusual but not unknown in the Indian Ocean. The first modern tsunami hit the Indian Ocean more than a century ago on August 27, 1883. The trigger on that occasion was not an earthquake, but a volcano—the eruption of the Krakatau in the Sunda Strait. It unleashed tsunami waves up to thirty meters high that drowned 34,000 people on the coasts of Sumatra and Java. The tsunami radiated out toward Sri Lanka and the southeast coast of India, striking Aden on the southern tip of the Arabian peninsula in about twelve hours. A natural catastrophe in the Indian Ocean, the 1883 tsunami was also a global event in more ways than one. It caused small but significant sea-level oscillations in other oceans that were recorded as far as Hawaii, the west coast of the United States, and even the English Channel. It made front-page news—carried by a newly laid telegraph—in the world’s newspapers. In 2004, too, energy from the Indian Ocean tsunami was reported to have "leaked into adjoining oceans, producing sea-level fluctuations at many places around the world." In the age of the Internet, news and anxiety about the 2004 calamity certainly reverberated worldwide, even though experts at the Pacific tsunami warning center did not know whom in the Indian Ocean to warn of the impending disaster. The tsunami devastated Indian Ocean coastal communities, but Western tourists in seaside resorts were also caught up in its swirl.

Yet the devastation and aftermath of the 2004 tsunami also brought to light the deep and unique bonds that tie together the peoples of this interregional arena of human interaction. Despite the global outpouring of sympathy, the sense of the peoples of the Indian Ocean rim sharing a common historical destiny was palpable. The ocean was—and, in many ways, continues to be—characterized by specialized flows of capital and labor, skills and services, ideas and culture.

The contemporary analogy of the tsunami makes vivid a novel contribution that this book seeks to make to our historical understanding of the modern process of globalization, namely, the continuing relevance of the Indian Ocean as an interregional space in a time of intense global interconnections. Just as waves in one ocean produce fluctuations in sea levels in others, the human history of the Indian Ocean is strung together at a higher level of intensity in the interregional arena while contributing to and being affected by structures, processes, and events of global significance. A radically new perspective on the history of globalization can, therefore, be offered by focusing on the historical space that intermediates between the levels of nation and globe. Such a focus may enable us to tease out both the power and the limits of globalization as a historical phenomenon.

After the 2004 tsunami tragedy, an assertion made in 2003 that "it is people, not water, that created unity and a recognizable Indian Ocean that historians can study" may sound like a case of human beings tempting Providence. While nature’s fury provides a stern reminder of the limits of human capability, the claim about people forging unity in an interregional arena such as the Indian Ocean still has merit. It also makes
more challenging the task of sketching spatial boundaries. “For what boundaries can be marked,” the great historian of the Mediterranean Fernand Braudel asked, “when we are dealing not with plants and animals, relief and climate, but men, whom no barriers or frontiers can stop?” He answered: “Med-
iterranean civilization spreads far beyond its shores in great waves that are balanced by continual returns . . . We should imagine a hundred frontiers, not one, some political, some economic, and some cultural.” Having used an oceanic meta-
phor, Braudel was convinced that the “wheel of human for-
tune” had “determined the destiny of the sea,” rather than the other way around.

In exploring Indian Ocean history in all its richness, we have to imagine a hundred horizons, not one, of many hues and colors. This book, too, will emphasize the role of human agency, imagination, and action, while being a little more humble in respecting the power of the sea. The people of the Indonesian islands, in particular, seem to be in need of some mercy from the goddess of the southern ocean whom they have revered through the ages and who appears to have abandoned them at this moment.

Spatial Boundaries of an Interregional Arena

According to Bernard Bailyn, “There comes a moment when historians . . . blink their eyes and suddenly see within a mass of scattered information a new configuration that has a general meaning never grasped before, an emergent pattern that has some kind of enhanced explanatory power. That happened somewhere along the line in the past three decades, to bring the idea of Atlantic history into focus.” A very similar claim can be made about the idea of Indian Ocean history as it has evolved in the minds of many historians across many seas, but there is one major difference: “Nobody I know,” Bailyn asserts, “is or has been poetically enraptured by the Atlantic world.” Whatever the relationship might be between Atlantic history and poetry, there is no question that the history of the Indian Ocean world is enmeshed with its poetry and in some ways propelled by it, as will be clear from my engagement with a problem even as prosaic as that of spatial and temporal boundaries.

“Space,” writes K. N. Chaudhuri, “is a more fundamental, rational and a priori dimension for social action than time-order and succession.” For example, it is possible to mark on a map “the sites of all the important historical battlefields, great urban centres, caravan routes, and the commercial emporia in the Indian Ocean,” regardless of when they were active. Such an exercise enables one to sift out the elements of structural importance in Indian Ocean history. Further, the continuity of a spatial surface and an idea of its limits are dependent not only on physical structure but also on the cognitive domain of mental processes. It was not the geographical morphology but the interpretation of “the distant grey silhouette of the Girnar mountain” of Gujarat that marked for sailors in the western Indian Ocean the welcoming, yet perilous, gateway to the inner domain of Hind. Space “takes precedence” in historical understanding over its complementary field of chronology.

The history and historiography of the Indian Ocean can be introduced, as a seascape artist might do, in broad strokes of
the brush: once dipped in the sources of many archives, the picture as a whole will emerge more textured and complex. The issue of spatial boundaries helps us theorize and place in historical context the Indian Ocean as an interregional arena of political, economic, and cultural interaction. Then temporal thresholds will be addressed to define a meaningful scheme of periodization for Indian Ocean history. Some thematic and methodological issues concerning structure and narrative may help lend coherence to a field of study that demands an ability to engage in fairly large-scale comparisons. Such an effort is necessary to clear the deck as a prelude to a series of sea voyages across the Indian Ocean.

The Indian Ocean is best characterized as an “interregional arena” rather than as a “system,” a term that has more rigid connotations. An interregional arena lies somewhere between the generalities of a “world system” and the specificities of particular regions. Regional entities known today as the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, which underpin the rubric of area studies in the Western academy, are relatively recent constructions that arbitrarily project certain legacies of colonial power onto the domain of knowledge in the post-colonial era. The world of the Indian Ocean, or for that matter, that of the Mediterranean, has a much greater depth of economic and cultural meaning. Tied together by webs of economic and cultural relationships, such arenas nevertheless had flexible internal and external boundaries. These arenas, where port cities formed the nodal points of exchange and interaction, have been so far mostly theorized, described, and analyzed only for the premodern and early modern periods.

They have not generally formed the canvas on which scholars have written histories of the modern era. If the Mediterranean was seen to have been swamped by a world capitalist system with a global reach, the organic unity of the Indian Ocean rim was widely assumed to have been ruptured with the establishment of European political and economic domination by the latter half of the eighteenth century.

The Portuguese presence in the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth century and the Dutch role there in the seventeenth century have been the subject of some interesting revisionist work, but insightful scholarship on the Indian Ocean as an interregional arena and level of analysis in the period after 1750, and especially after 1830, is still in its early stages. Colonial frontiers came to obstruct the study of comparisons and links across regions and left as a lasting legacy a general narrowing of scholarly focus within the framework of area studies. Macro-models such as the world-systems perspective, while transcending these limitations, have tended to view an omnipotent West as the main locus of historical initiative and are too diffuse to take adequate account of the rich and complex interregional arenas of economic, political, and cultural relationships. Micro-approaches, such as subaltern studies, have done much to recover the significance of marginal actors, but have been overall a little too engrossed in discourses of the local community and the nation to engage in broader comparisons. One way to disturb the stereotyped views of India or Islam that have been colonialism’s legacy is to unravel the internal fragments; the other is to render permeable and then creatively trespass across rather rigidly drawn external
boundaries. It is to the latter effort that a reconceptualization of the Indian Ocean as an interregional arena can lend some much needed momentum.

It is hard to deal with spatial boundaries to the exclusion of temporal thresholds, but it may be worthwhile to pause and concentrate for a moment on the ways in which the problems of spatial limits and elements of unity of the Indian Ocean region can be approached. Although the ocean referred to in old Arab navigational treatises as al bahr al Hindi has long been perceived to have some kind of unity, there can be no single answer to the question of its geographical extent. The spatial boundaries of the Indian Ocean have varied according to the nature of cultural, economic, and political interactions under consideration and have certainly altered over time. For the 1500 to 1800 period it is plausible to suggest outer boundaries drawn by the East African coast north to the Red Sea and extending east all the way along the Asian coast through the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal to the Strait of Malacca. It can be argued that in the early nineteenth century southern Africa and even western Australia were drawn more emphatically into the orbit of the human history of the Indian Ocean.

More important for any project aimed at unraveling the symbiotic activities of people on land and at sea is a discussion of the principles of unity and disunity that have been seen to have undergirded the Indian Ocean as an interregional arena of economy and culture. At the broadest level the rhythms of long-distance oceanic trade have been recognized as having provided a basis for the unity of the Indian Ocean until the eighteenth century. The overemphasis on trade has tended to obscure much else that went along with it, especially the flow of ideas and culture. The exploration of the Indian Ocean as a cultural milieu is quite as important as its role as a trading zone.

The problem of unity and commonalities has been addressed in a variety of ways by different historians of the Indian Ocean. Among them, K. N. Chaudhuri has made the most deliberate attempt to have his history from the rise of Islam to 1750 be informed by a “rigorous theory of the concept of unity and disunity, continuity and discontinuity, ruptures and thresholds.” The unity of economic and social life in the Indian Ocean realm takes on “analytical cohesion,” according to Chaudhuri, “not from the observable unity of a spatial construct but from the dynamics of structural relations.” Yet it remains an open question whether the recourse to mathematical precision fares much better than a historian’s intuitive presumptions in resolving the problem of the spatial limits of an interregional arena of human interaction. In Chaudhuri’s scheme the Indian Ocean blends imperceptibly into Asia, comprising four distinct but comparable “civilisations”—Islamic, Sanskritic Indian, Chinese, and Southeast Asian. If Braudel’s gaze from the south of France failed to acknowledge the historical actors on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, the limitations of Chaudhuri’s perspective become apparent in the marginalization of Africa. “The exclusion of East Africa from our civilizational identities,” he writes, “needs a special word of explanation. In spite of its
close connection with the Islamic world, the indigenous African communities appear to have been structured by a historical logic separate and independent from the rest of the Indian Ocean.” This special word on Africa seems to fall short of an explanation.

Other historians less ambitious about contributing to a grand theory have offered alternative typologies of unity amid diversity in the Indian Ocean region. One alternative advances an argument about three layers of unity: racial, influenced by patterns of migration; cultural, emanating out of India; and religious, shaped primarily by the spread of Islam. M. N. Pearson sees “considerable unity in matters of monsoons, ports, ships and sailors.” Another unifying factor can be noticed in “the widespread distribution of certain products from particular areas.” For example, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries the great majority of the inhabitants across the Indian ocean wore Indian cottons that came from one of three major production centers in Gujarat, Coromandel, or Bengal. Among several other elements of commonality, if not unity, one of the more important was supplied by religious activities, especially the Muslim hajj, which was crucial to the working of a large and complex cultural and trade network in the premodern and early modern periods.

Did the Indian Ocean rim continue to be a coherently definable interregional arena after the imposition of European economic and political domination by the first half of the nineteenth century? If so, it will be useful to inquire what principles of unity might have sustained this level of economy and culture in an age when it had become part of and in many ways subservient to a global set of interconnections. Most historians of the Indian Ocean have preferred to assume that it stopped being a system or arena around the mid- to late eighteenth century. But histories of agrarian regions in colonial India have shown that migrant capital and labor played a crucial role in forging between 1850 and 1930 a system of interregional specialization and interdependence across the Bay of Bengal involving the old settled agrarian zones, newly developed rice frontiers, and the plantations and mines sector. Rajat Kanta Ray has suggested in a very substantial and thoughtful essay that “the imposition of the hegemony of Western capital and the disruption of the older Indian Ocean economy constitutes a process much more complex than is to be comprehended in terms of a unidimensional history of the expansion of ‘the capitalist world economy.’” In fact, he argues that the Indian and Chinese chain of trade and finance stretching from Zanzibar to Singapore formed “a distinct international system that never lost its identity in the larger dominant world system of the West.” The bazaar nexus occupying the intermediate tier of a three-tiered system—with European capital at the top and the world of peasants, peddlers, and pawnbrokers below—provided the critical link across the Indian Ocean during the nineteenth century. The concept of the bazaar here is quite removed from the narrow and ahistorical notion of it as atomistic person-to-person transactions. Instead, the bazaar refers to wholesale commerce above the level of local markets and even more importantly to “the indigenous
money market which finances, through promissory notes, bills of exchange (sultajas, hundis, etc.) and other negotiable instruments, the wholesale and forward trade over the longer distances." The "colonial expansion of the international capitalist economy of Europe and the rise of the new pan-Asian economic formation dubbed the bazaar" have been interpreted as related historical processes of the modern era.23

There were strands other than the ties of intermediary capital that sustained the Indian Ocean rim as an interregional arena of economy and culture. From about 1800 to 1930 pre-existing interregional networks were utilized, molded, reordered, and rendered subservient by Western capital and the more powerful colonial states, but never torn apart until these networks came under severe strain during the 1930s. Almost throughout the age of European colonialism, the Indian Ocean rim was characterized by specialized flows of capital and labor, administrative skills and professional services, and ideas and culture. Not to be mistaken for continuity between the precolonial and colonial eras, such a reinterpretation requires a new paradigm for the European colonial and paracolonial enterprise of domination as well as a subtler understanding of the unities and distinctive features of the cultures and idioms of anticolonial resistance. The fortunes and fears of migrant Indian merchants, moneylenders, soldiers, and laborers make it imperative to blend imaginatively the dimensions of economy, politics, and culture in rethinking the Indian Ocean as an interregional arena in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But if theory is not to be disconnected from history and space from time, I need at this stage to turn to that part of the can-

vas where temporal thresholds can be sketched in and juxtaposed with the sweeping lines of spatial limits.

Temporal Thresholds

The Indian Ocean has been traversed by a number of distinguished historians with a penchant for describing long- and medium-term movements in trade and culture. Whether they have taken on a whole millennium or just a couple of centuries, most have chosen to concentrate on the premodern and early modern periods. What emerges from these studies of the Indian Ocean until the eighteenth century is a picture of a well-integrated interregional arena of economic and cultural interaction and exchange. Particularly important connections of material life, politico-military organization, economic institutions, and social-religious ideology were forged across the ocean during the millennium that stretched from the eighth to the eighteenth century. The modification of these links in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries critically influenced the nature of the colonial transition in South and Southeast Asia and European ascendancy in the Middle East.24 The direct links of political economy of the recent decades since the oil boom of 1973 have also been written about by economists and political scientists. The study of linkages and the comparative context is now beginning to receive the attention it deserves in historical research spanning the period from circa 1830 to 1970. It is this apparent hiatus between the early colonial and contemporary periods that my discussion of the matter of temporal thresholds will primarily address.
A HUNDRED HORIZONS

The ancient, if not eternal, quality of the Indian Ocean has appealed not just to historians, but to poets and philosophers as well. Although coastal trading links between India and Mesopotamia go back nearly five millennia, it was the cracking of the code of the mausim or monsoon, probably in the seventh century B.C., that "dramatically extended the range of human movement across the Ocean, making possible increased direct contact between the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia." The thriving agrarian and urban economies of the Achaemenid and Mauryan empires provided the basis for the exchanges between the Middle East and South Asia, which predated the crafting of close links between South and Southeast Asia. By the beginning of the common era, there was a perceptible shift in the balance, from the earlier emphasis on luxuries, to staple goods in the commodity composition of the Indian Ocean trade. At key centers throughout this realm sprang up important expatriate communities of South Asian merchants, who appear to have been more direct agents of cultural diffusion in Southeast Asia than in the Middle East.

The old Indian Ocean arena managed to cast a spell on the imaginative mind of a leading twentieth-century Bengali poet. In his famous ode to the eternal woman "Banalata Sen," Jibanananda Das evoked its atmosphere:

A thousand years have I been roaming the world's pathways,
From Ceylon to Malaya in darkness of night across oceans

SPACE AND TIME ON THE INDIAN OCEAN RIM

Much have I traveled; in the grey universe of Bimbisara, Ashoka,
Yes, I was there; deeper in the darkness in Vidarbha metropolis,
A weary soul, I, life's waves all around foaming at the crest,
A moment or two of peace she gave me, Natore's Banalata Sen.

Her hair, darker than the darkest Vidisha night,
Her face, Sravasti's carved ivory; on the distant sea
As a lost sailor of a rudderless ship
Sees on a sudden the line of an island's green
Have I seen her in the darkness; she has asked, "Where have you been, so long?"
Raising her eyes like a bird's nest, Natore's Banalata Sen.

At day's end, like the sound of dewdrops
Evening descends; the seagull wipes the sun's scent from its wings;
When all the colors of the world have faded, the Manuscript prepares
For stories then in colors of fireflies, glowing,
All the birds come home—all the rivers—life's transactions end;
There remains only darkness, and to sit face to face with Banalata Sen.
In another, less well-known, epigrammatic poem he let his imagination fly in a westerly direction:

A thousand years just play like fireflies in the darkness
Pyramids all around, the stench of the dead,
Moonlight on the sand, palm-shadows scattered
Broken pillars, as if: Assyria stands dead, pale.
The smell of mummies in our bodies, life’s transactions
have all ended.
“Do you remember?” she asked, and I gasped,
“Banalata Sen.”

South Asian mariners and merchants played the key integrative role in the economy and culture of the Indian Ocean arena during the first millennium of the common era. After the third century their ties were closer with Southeast Asia than the Middle East, as Arabs and Persians began to play a more active role in the western Indian Ocean during the decline of the Roman Empire. The Chinese mercantile presence in Southeast Asia began a serious rivalry with that of the South Asians, but also formed another strong link in the Indian Ocean chain, from the tenth century. Meanwhile, in the eleventh century, Arabs and Persians as well as a few South Asians began to draw the Somali and Swahili coast of East Africa more firmly into the Indian Ocean network. The rapid spread of Islam across the Indian Ocean between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries wove a new pattern of economic and cultural unity throughout this vast interregional arena. By the fifteenth century Arab and Indian merchants, mostly Mus-

lim but some Hindu and Jain as well, were in the vanguard of maritime economic activity from the Mozambique coast in the west to the Moluccas islands in the east. At the same time, Sufi preachers fanning out from the port cities into the agricultural hinterlands were creating a common world of religious-cultural ambience and sensibility. It is this so-called high medieval period—from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries—that Ashin Daskgupta has identified as the peak of indigenous maritime activity in the Indian Ocean region.27

Did the early European forays into the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries fundamentally alter or undermine the principles of economic and social integration in the region? The Portuguese certainly introduced a new kind of armed trading and a novel assertion of sovereignty over the waters of the Indian Ocean. Yet these two centuries have been characterized as “an age of partnership” between Europeans and Asians or as “an age of contained conflict” in India and the Indian Ocean. Scholarship on this period of Southeast Asia’s history has disabused us of any simplistic notions of economic and societal decline.28 Overall, Ashin Daskgupta has claimed, after the first “violent overture” the Portuguese in the sixteenth century “settled within the structure and were, in a way, swallowed by it.” The English and the Dutch in the seventeenth century also worked to a certain extent within the indigenous structure, “and except the few pockets in Indonesia claimed by the Dutch, they were everywhere one more strand in the weave of the ocean’s trade.”29 Recent scholarship, however, has suggested that the early European incursions were rather more disruptive of Asian economic and political ar-
arrangements than has been recognized by early modern historians of the Indian Ocean. Indian Ocean historians, so adept at defying the constraints of arbitrary spatial boundaries imposed by conventional area studies, have been by and large remarkably diffident about crossing the great temporal divide of the eighteenth century. But that has not prevented many of them from making confident assertions about the decisive end of a millennium in Indian Ocean history. A few examples will suffice. One distinguishes "five successive stages" in what is called a "millennium of Islamic expansion." This scheme locates the fifth stage in the eighteenth century when "finally, India's core position is subordinated to metropolitan British control and the integrative network of Indian Ocean relations is destroyed." Another has written of 1750 as marking the end of "a life-cycle of human civilisation." A third views the "most important change" that occurred in the eighteenth century as "the growing importance of the European factor in the Indian Ocean and the eventual sundering of the organic unity of trade and shipping towards the close of the period." Finally, a general history of the Indian Ocean is quite sanguine that "by the eighteenth century ... [the Indian Ocean] world was crumbling as it was overwhelmed, physically and economically, by European merchants and soldiers." Something dramatic certainly happened in the eighteenth century. Yet paradoxically, the abandonment by most historians of the Indian Ocean as an interregional arena of analysis—on the assumption that its organic unity had been sundered—made it especially difficult to ferret out the key elements of change during the transition to colonialism. This in turn has hampered the development of a historical method that would unsettle the discredited, yet entrenched, notions of a West versus rest and other accompanying dichotomies. The challenge in this regard is to keep in play an Indian Ocean interregional arena of economic and cultural interaction as an analytical unit while avoiding the pitfalls of assuming any uncomplicated and unsustainable thesis about continuity.

The question of colonial insertion into the political economy of India and, by extension, of the Indian Ocean needs to be addressed in more complex ways. One way is to note the qualitative differences between precolonial and colonial capitalism. The portfolio capitalist, a ubiquitous figure on the Indian scene since 1500, was "an entrepreneur who farmed revenue, engaged in local agricultural trade, commanded military resources (war animals, arms and human labour), as well as on more than the odd occasion had a flutter in the Great Game of Indian Ocean commerce." The beginnings of the process of erosion of one significant item on the portfolio—independent seaborne commerce—lay in tough competition from European private trade at the turn of the eighteenth century. (One of the ultimate beneficiaries of the shift was a university on the east coast of the United States, Elihu Yale having been prominent among the rising private traders of that moment on the Coromandel Coast.) These "nabobs" were different from the typical Asian portfolio capitalist in two ways: they were linked to the English East India Company and eventually to the colonial state, and they dramatically altered the scale of British remittance out of India. By around 1820 the company’s
state in India had taken a series of measures to cut the cord between commerce and political power, which had contributed to the undoing of the indigenous states and had the potential to threaten the colonialists once they began acquiring state power (from 1757 onward). The building of networks and portfolios by Indian expatriates in Southeast Asia and the Middle East later in the nineteenth century borrowed "much more from the 'Chinese model' of overseas intermediation than from South Asian portfolio capitalism."

While there were certain analogies between the Chinese and Indian patterns of interregional links across the Indian Ocean in this period, the Indian variant also bore some of the unmistakable marks of colonial difference. The spatial boundaries and temporal thresholds shaping the Indian Ocean's modern and postmodern history might be lent some further perspective and depth by painting in a set of important, related themes that will clarify the elements of comparison, continuity, and change.

Comparisons and Connections

A comparative examination of three broad themes will help frame our understanding of the colonial and postcolonial periods in Indian Ocean history. A point of entry into explorations of these themes can be found by embarking with early twentieth-century travelers on a number of sea voyages. This literary and methodological device is crucial in order to avoid the high degree of abstraction that characterizes so much of global, oceanic, interregional, and comparative histories in

which real human beings and their agency vanish from view. While accepting the broad framework of a movement in time from the imposition of colonial and paracolonial domination to the articulation of anticolonial resistance on an interregional plane, I tell my stories in the form of a series of nonlinear narratives. The weaving of broad patterns of interregional networks is matched in each chapter by the unraveling of individual tales of proconsuls and pirates, capitalists and laborers, soldiers and sailors, patriots and expatriates, pilgrims and poets. An analysis of the large flows of goods and money is balanced with an interpretation of the perceptions and experiences of people who were key actors in the Indian Ocean interregional arena in modern times.

We launch into the role of colonialism in restructuring states and redefining ideologies of sovereignty by setting sail in Chapter 2 with Lord George Nathaniel Curzon, viceroy of India, from Karachi harbor toward the Persian Gulf, guns booming and masthead flags fluttering in the breeze. By tuning our ears to his public rhetoric and eavesdropping on his private conversations with His Majesty's government, we try to get a sense of how the British went about the task of making the sovereignty of some small princes one of the foundations of the supremacy of the almighty British sovereign of India in the waters of the Indian Ocean. The British raj has been typically regarded as having its basis in the territorial landmass of the Indian subcontinent and its external relations have been studied following the longitudinal axis that linked metropolitan Britain and colonial India. Curzon's voyage illuminates the latitudinal connections of India across the Indian
Ocean and opens a route for a reinterpretation of the British Empire, locating it in its oceanic spatial domain. Curzon’s claim that “a hundred years ago . . . almost every man [in the Indian Ocean world] was a marauder or a pirate” provides an opportunity to cast a glance backward in time to revisit the debate about the myth and reality of piracy.\textsuperscript{36}

The violence embedded in state-making processes in early modern Europe and the export of violence abroad by European “warrior nomads who differed little from the Mongols or the Mughals” are by now well-worn themes in world history.\textsuperscript{37} By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, the character of state violence engaged in by the British colonial state was qualitatively different from the warfare of the age of Mughal ascendancy and hegemony. It has been quite accurately observed that the “centralized state which was created in the colonial period was an entirely new political innovation in the Indian Ocean region.”\textsuperscript{38} Its key novel feature in India was one of the largest European-style standing armies in the world, which came into being during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. In the early nineteenth century, the soldiers of this colonial army crossed the kalapani (dark waters) to fight in Ceylon, Java, and the Red Sea area. Later in the nineteenth century and during the first half of the twentieth century, Britain’s Indian army was deployed even more widely in imperial operations in Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and China. The story of these soldiers, their movements across the seas, and their memories of these movements are taken up in Chapter 4. From the early nineteenth century onward, the state penetrated society much more deeply than it had before and reshaped several institutions in law, landed rights, religion, and some customs. It was at this time that wandering peoples on land were either forcibly settled or branded “criminal tribes” and their counterparts at sea termed “pirates.” Piracy may have been an old profession, but it was now infused with a new meaning.

The change in the meaning of sovereignty was fraught with even greater consequences. Precolonial states and polities generally possessed a shared and layered concept of sovereignty, which had helped create certain autonomous spaces for the inhabitants of port cities. Surat and Aden, for instance, had been part of the great land-based Mughal and Ottoman Empires, “yet they had autonomy enough not to be unduly harassed by their inland masters.”\textsuperscript{39} The notion of indivisible and unitary sovereignty imported under colonial conditions from Europe represented a major break from ideas of good governance and legitimacy that had been widespread in the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal domains and their regional successor states. Moreover, the British juxtaposed with their own monolithic sovereignty a particularly fake version of sovereignty invested in reinvented “traditional” rulers in post-1857 India (such as that in Kashmir), and extended it to coastal polities in the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Bay of Bengal around the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{40} Later sections of Chapter 2 investigate the clash of Burmese pride with British paramountcy and the reconfiguration of the relationship between Malay sultans and British power extended from India. This process went on at the same time as “traditional states” were being formed in the Gulf under the watchful eye of British residents. The sower-
eighty accorded to some of the Gulf sheikhdoms was, as Curzon let slip in 1903, no more than the other side of the coin on which the supremacy of British power was clearly engraved. The Indian Ocean realm experienced a sea change in the concept of sovereignty in the age of high imperialism, which has lingered as colonialism’s most poisoned legacy.

The second theme is the relationship of Asian intermediary capital and migrant labor with the broader structures of colonial and paracolonial capitalism. Historians of India have been pointing out the brief congruence of interests of indigenous merchants and bankers with the East India Company, which facilitated the transition to colonialism. Yet it is also becoming clear that once the company had state power within its grasp, it generally clobbered indigenous merchant capitalists within most Indian regions. In other words, there was a significant decline in the position of most intermediate groups on whose collaboration colonial rule had initially rested. Indeed, the British had made “considerable strides by 1830 towards wiping the middle ground clean” of portfolio capitalists. The timing of the erosion of these figures varied with the progress of colonial conquest. The Jagat Seths, for example, whose deep purse had aided the conquest of Bengal in 1757, were forced in the early 1760s—during the brief revival of power of the nawab of Bengal under Mir Kasim—to pay what was owed to the British and then move bag and baggage from their mansion in Murshidabad to live in virtual detention in Monghyr. In another case, several Hindu and Parsi financiers of cotton production and trade who helped finance the British takeover of Gujarat in 1803 had reasons to regret their alliance by the 1810s. The Hotchand family, which bankrolled the British possession of Sind in 1842, paid for their sins by rapidly losing out in shipping and seaborne trade (although they survived as landlords and bureaucrats).

Significantly, it was precisely in certain sectors of seaborne commerce, which is supposed to have dropped out of the portfolio of Indian men of capital in the eighteenth century, that some found opportunities for profit in the nineteenth century. The rise of the Omani empire stretching from Muscat to Zanzibar in the early nineteenth century gave certain Gujarati communities the opening they needed to create a lucrative niche in the interregional arena of Indian Ocean revenue-gathering and trade. Later in the century, Indian traders and financiers followed the British imperial flag to engage in what was perhaps dependent seaborne commerce but which nevertheless enabled them to carve out sectors or pockets of local dominance in Southeast Asia, East Africa, and the Middle East. Indian intermediary capital was of critical importance to business in the rice frontiers of Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam; laborers in need of capital on the rubber plantations of Malaya; the sugar industries of Natal and Mauritius; initially the slave trade and later the cloves economy in Zanzibar; the ivory trade and the coconut and cashews economy in Mozambique; the pearl economy of the Gulf and the Red Sea; the coffee economy of Yemen; and the bazaars of southern Iran. In addition to their role as financiers, Indians were selling agents for British, Indian, and finally Japanese manufactured products, including textiles.

While their long historical experience in handling money
enabled Indian, Baghdadi Jewish, and Chinese specialist communities to adjust to the age of European colonial capitalism and dominate the bazaar economy of the Indian Ocean, a couple of caveats are in order. The Bhatias and Memon from Kutch who rose to prominence in East Africa and the Middle East, and the Chettiar from Tamil Nadu who came to the forefront in Southeast Asia, were new dominant groups—not the same old banking communities from an earlier age. Also, one needs to be careful not to write out of history the dogged resistance of sailing communities in the Arab and Malay worlds, even while acknowledging the dominance that European shipping came to exercise in the waters of the Indian Ocean. The Arab dhow and Malay prahu boats, with all they represent, had a much longer afterlife than is commonly supposed. An overemphasis on the relevance or irrelevance of earlier skills in the age of the communications revolution of the later nineteenth century runs the risk of falling into a technological determinism; historical outcomes were actually being influenced by a more complex interplay of domination, collaboration, and resistance among economic and political actors. With the solitary exception of the Sassoons, none of the Asian intermediary capitalists was able to break into the arena of high finance in the colonial era. The entire intermediary structure was also vulnerable to the possibility of coming unhinged as a result of crises at the higher echelons of the capitalist architecture and the foundation of agrarian production below, as was to become dramatically apparent during the 1930s depression.

The so-called Indian and Chinese models of interregional links were different in the ways in which the flows of capital were related to the flows of labor. In the case of the Chinese in Southeast Asia, the movement of labor seems to have been tied in a dependent relationship to the movement of intermediary capital, and while Chinese capital and labor in Malaya were integrally connected, the Klang laborers and Chettiar capitalists were distinct immigrant groups. In the Indian instance the flows of labor and capital were often quite separate, and the colonial state played an important part in regulating the movement of indentured labor across the Indian Ocean, as well as farther afield to the Caribbean and Fiji islands. The Indian flows of the colonial era also contained a significant component of professional and service workers. The relationship of these migrants with local peasants and laborers often became fraught with deep tensions and constitutes one of the more important subplots in the story of anticolonial and postcolonial nationalisms in Southeast Asia and Africa. In the colonial era, the cosmopolitan array of peoples in the port cities and their hinterlands no longer translated readily into a cosmopolitan attitude. During the early decades of this century not only was the pace of anticolonial nationalisms quickened at these sites, but also related sectarian and “communal” conflicts were accentuated. Such conflicts cannot be explained without addressing the seemingly continuous but indeed transformed interregional flows of capital and labor in the colonial era.

These flows of capital and labor are considered most fully in Chapter 3. The voluminous and valuable colonial records on Indian intermediary capital and migrant labor available in archives in London and New Delhi are the very best for a re-
construction of the economic history of the Indian Ocean interregional arena. But in order to probe the memories and meanings of migration, we turn to memoirs, travel accounts, and letters as well. Statistical evidence is offset by textual sources, the quantitative aspects of trade and finance balanced by a range of qualitative source materials that tend to be more evocative.6

J. H. Parry had once commented on the modern period of oceanic history: “All the seas of the world are one.” Indeed, the sea of the Indian and Chinese merchants, bankers, and financiers effectively extended from East Africa to Southeast Asia. Yet the fact that none of the Asian intermediary capitalists except the Sassoons could enter London’s financial world suggests that there were some glass ceilings in the capitalist architecture. Psychological obstacles were certainly as important as material barriers. The nineteenth-century movement of indentured labor monitored by the British colonial state to the Caribbean across the Atlantic and to Fiji in the middle of the Pacific may have been part of a connected economic system along with migration to plantations in different parts of the Indian Ocean arena. But a recovery of the voices of indentured laborers indicates that these movements were experienced and felt by them in rather different ways, with some implications for understanding the outer limits of al-Hind in the modern, colonial period.67

It is not easy to breathe life into things. But each of the key commodities in Indian Ocean trade have engendered vibrant stories, some of which I try to record in Chapter 3. The focus here is on the relationship of people to commodities and the interregional networks of capital and labor that made their production and marketing possible. To construct my narrative of interregional links across the Arabian Sea, I examine under a microscope a primary product—pearls—that had to be extracted from the seabed and then introduce the tasting of a spice—clove—that was grown on the tiny islands of Zanzibar and Pemba. For the flows across the Bay of Bengal a plantation product—rubber—cultivated on the Malay peninsula and rice grown on the great Irrawaddy delta are my commodities of choice. Work on the plantations was almost invariably done by migrant laborers while capital was supplied on the rice frontiers by Indian and Chinese intermediaries. The power of European capital seemed to lie in its ability to choose its clearly delimited spheres of operation.

The third and broadest theme is the role of extraterritorial identity and universalist aspiration among the people of the Indian Ocean arena in the age of global empire. The dreams and goals of the colonized were never fully constrained by the territorial frontiers of colonial states.46 Nationalism and universalism, far from being in an adversarial relationship, were bound in a strong symbiotic embrace. Anticolonialism as an ideology was both tethered by the idea of homeland while strengthened by extraterritorial affiliations. Islam in particular and religiously informed universalism in general provided an overarching unity in their varied regional and cultural settings. Premodern and early modern historians of the Indian Ocean have shown that Islam signified both integration and cosmopolitanism in that wide realm. I seek to reappraise the experiences of Muslim encounters with European colonialism
in the Indian Ocean arena, long objectified by a weighty Orientalist tradition that has come under serious challenge but has not yet been laid to rest. A comparative approach regarding the strengths and weaknesses, bonds and fissures, of Islam as an ideology of anticolonial resistance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is an eminently worthwhile exercise. For example, what went through the minds of Indian Muslim soldiers as they fought under the British imperial flag during World War I and served in an army of occupation in parts of the Middle East? In the same period, how did leading Indian Muslim thinkers invoke Islam to justify their conscientious objection to World War I? Why did so many Indians become deeply concerned with the fate of the sultan-caliph toward the war's end? The Khilafat movement of 1919 was, after all, the first mass nationalist movement to span all of India. Islam had been one key element in the unity of the Indian Ocean in an earlier age; what was its role in the age of high imperialism and its aftermath?

Chapter 4 journeys with the soldiers who fought for and eventually against the British Empire in the wide Indian Ocean realm. The sources here include censored letters of Indian subalterns, the depiction of soldiers' experiences in the imagination of realist literature, depositions in courts-martial as well as memoirs of different sorts. The study of these soldiers explores the interplay among loyalties to empire, religion, and nation and, in the process, contributes to an understanding of the simultaneous pulls of universalism and nationalism. We enter the world of patriots and expatriates in Chapter 5 by waiting with Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi outside Durban harbor on his second voyage to South Africa. Gandhi, it must be stressed, came to Natal as a lawyer to represent Indian business interests. During his twenty-one-year stay in South Africa, he did not take more than a fleeting interest in the condition of Indian indentured laborers, men and women, who worked on the sugar plantations in Natal. We also accompany Gopal Krishna Gokhale, the moderate leader of the Indian National Congress, on his voyage to South Africa in 1912. This chapter analyzes the relationship between various castes, classes, and communities in the emerging politics to protect "Indian" interests in South Africa. It also asks what lessons, if any, Gandhi might have taken from South Africa for his political career in India, especially regarding the challenge of accommodating religious difference. This question, after all, was prominent in Gandhi's mass movements of 1919–1922, which sought to fuse together Indian nationalism with Islamic universalism. We then take a ninety-day submarine journey—including a transfer from one submarine to another in a rubber boat off the coast of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean with national leader Subhas Chandra Bose and his trusted lieutenant Abid Hasan—to reach the Indian expatriates in Southeast Asia who took part in a patriotic movement from 1943 to 1945. Here too we examine the role of Indians of various castes, classes, and communities in the independence movement and seek some insights into what motivated Indians, some of whom had never seen India, to fight for the freedom of their distant or imaginary homeland.

During the twentieth century, the peoples of the Indian Ocean rim witnessed both oppression and liberation, terrible
destruction and remarkable creativity. For all the conflicts between rival empires, nation-states, sects, and communities, there were also voices extolling the ocean as a symbol of universal humanity—its unfathomable depths matched by its hundred horizons, if not a horizonless infinity. In this spirit, Chapters 6 and 7 turn to the theme of pilgrimage. Chapter 6 tries to recreate the experience, atmosphere, and meanings of the Muslim hajj in the modern period by using firsthand accounts as well as annual reports and enquiry committee reports on the hajj produced by the colonial government of India. Chapter 7 turns to the form of pilgrimage embarked on by poets and philosophers, who sought to discover elements of India’s history and identities outside the strict territorial borders of the subcontinent. In particular, the chapter travels with Rabindranath Tagore on his later oceanic journeys, including one in search of “greater India” across the Bay of Bengal and another that traced the lineaments of the universal brotherhood of Sufi poets bridging the Arabian Sea.

On his visit to Shīrāz in 1932, Rabindranath Tagore claimed close kinship with the medieval Sufi poets Saadi and Hafiz; the only difference, he said, was that he spoke in the language of the modern age. A leading historian of premodern trade and civilization in the Indian Ocean wrote in 1983:

There are few studies which examine the historical past of the Indian Ocean countries before 1800 as a single subject. The tendency of history schools to divide themselves into regional branches has led to intense specialisation, adding greatly to our knowledge of finer details; but the task of integrating this knowledge into a general mosaic of interpretation is still incomplete. The purpose of this work is to begin a personal pilgrimage along that long road.\(^{90}\)

Walking on the same path of pilgrimage, displaced only by time, I seek in this work to make a similar advance in our understanding of this vast interregional arena by reintegrating the modern history of culture, politics, and economy of the Indian Ocean rim.