

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Michael N. Pearson. *The World of the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800: Studies in Economic, Social and Cultural History.* Burlington: Ashgate, 2005. 336 pp. \$124.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-86078-962-8.

Reviewed by Lakshmi Subramaniam (Senior Fellow in History, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta)

Published on H-Asia (February, 2006)

M. N. Pearson needs no introduction to scholars and students of Indian Ocean history of the early modern period, which for our immediate purposes encompasses the centuries from the advent of Vasco da Gama in 1498 to the formal establishment of colonial power in the Indian subcontinent from 1765. Admittedly, the periodization of the early modern is problematic and increasingly complicated by its deployment as an analytic category to understand and identify certain social, economic, and political processes that had the potential for societal transformation before these were deflected and redirected by the colonial encounter. This last is an issue that Pearson does not address in the volume.

The volume is a collection of fifteen essays, all of which have been previously published, but now are arranged around a rough thematic of the creativity and resilience of Indian Ocean societies—features that in the past were obscured by Eurocentric historiography. Pearson, like his other distinguished colleague, Ashin Dasgupta, was among the first scholars to interrogate Eurocentric assumptions that marginalized Asian trading activity as socially insignificant, economically limited, and culturally incapable of resisting the might of western guns, law, and technology. This volume reflects the same concerns, and while it is a collection of detailed individual studies of specific littoral societies and situations, it makes a more pointed case for the commonality of the Indian Ocean experience. It is almost entirely based on Portuguese documentation that Pearson reads and uses with great sensitivity. What is missing, however, is an introduction that could have factored in the more recent historical treatment of the early modern period in the history of India and the Indian Ocean.

The first section of the volume deals with economic and trade history. I will focus on the essays

dealing with indigenous trading groups in Indian and Africa. For the subcontinent, we have case studies of Goa and Surat, premier cities of the western littoral which evolved sophisticated scaffolding for overseas trade. The Surat broker was a key figure in this structure.

The Bania broker of Surat is not an unfamiliar figure to specialists and while Pearson's treatment does not add by way of information or interpretation to existing studies, his treatment of the linguistic abilities of the brokers is insightful for it raises larger issues of translatability in cross-cultural situations. At the same time, it underscores the role of the state as a facilitator of trade at least in Sultanate Gujarat in providing and maintaining integrative functions that were mediated largely through brokers. In contrast to the vibrancy and vitality of Gujarat was the Portuguese state of late seventeenth-century Goa. While demonstrating the obvious decline that Goa underwent, Pearson alerts his readers to the immense treasure trove that the Goa archives represent. His own analysis points to receding Portuguese participation in overseas trade and their replacement by local Hindu traders, notably the Saraswats. At the same time, there was steady flow outwards of Portuguese traders from Goa to Madras, Surat, and Bombay, thereby providing the basis for the later Portuguese appearance in the private trade of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A third essay deals with Indians in east Africa and qualifies the somewhat exaggerated picture of a large Indian in the region before the eighteenth century. It would appear that two groups became increasingly visible from the eighteenth century onwards—the ubiquitous Bania and the Canarin, both of whom moved along the axis of European penetration. The actual processes of interpenetration remain unclear—more research in that phenomenon may yield insights into the actual working of the world system in the eighteenth cen-

ture. This section also contains an important essay that engages with the world system debate—one that sees Immanuel Wallerstein’s formulations as flawed and inconsistent with the actuality on the ground. It shows that bullion flows into India were not hoarded—they were used—but they did not produce the same enabling conditions for capitalism.

The second section deals with issues of defining and discussing the category of “coastal society.” The introductory essay in this section talks about the validity of doing something that may be called littoral history. This, at one level, appears somewhat unnecessary, as the author himself admits what is important is not to quibble over categories but write good history, which is “really a seamless web,” but at another level, the intervention is actually important. Pearson does not however, address the fact that so many segments of Indian society have been blithely defined without any reference to the sea while, in fact, archeological evidence suggests that these segments were an integral part of the Indian ocean rim as much as they were of the insular land mass. Indeed, Pearson need not be so defensive in positing the idea of littoral society as a unit of study.

The most interesting section in the volume is the

one that deals with medical exchanges as part of a larger history of cultural interaction. On the basis of Portuguese records, Pearson reconstructs the system of medical practice in India, focusing on Goa and Malabar. What stands out from this preliminary exercise is the richness of available material that permits us to go beyond the conventional assumption that medical treatises were normative and static systems of thought that had no relevance to practice. Instead we may begin to explore how the reality of local practices and the operations of an indigenous and alternative belief system were mutated and transformed in the very process of European classification and taxonomy, and the social engineering of medicine in the form of hospitals and European treatment of disease.

The significance of this volume can hardly be contested. What it occasionally suffers from is a certain repetition of argument. One is left with a vague feeling of having read that before, but this is not to detract from its central coherence. The volume is a must read for students of maritime history and of the Indian Ocean, and a useful addition to the corpus of synthetic work that has emerged around the subject in recent years.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Lakshmi Subramaniam. Review of Pearson, Michael N., *The World of the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800: Studies in Economic, Social and Cultural History*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. February, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11474>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.