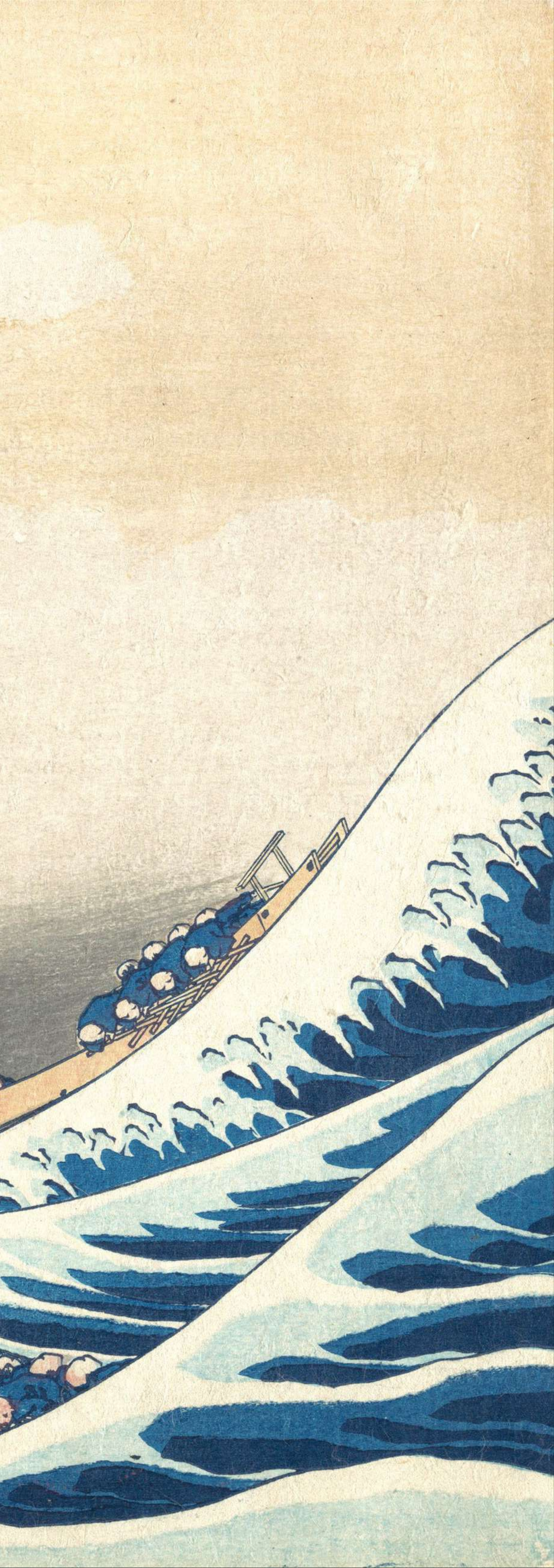


WHY THE SEA MATTERS?

By Dr Rila Mukherjee





Although not immediately apparent, water surrounds our lives. It covers 70% of the earth's surface, the rest followed by islands and continents. Places located far inland are influenced by water. Most landlocked Central Asia used a marine product (cowrie shells or cypria moneta) as money for two millennia despite possessing gold and silver. Hyderabad, laying at the heart of peninsular India is 'Pearl City', a name evoking its long-forgotten link to the sea through the Qutb Shahi port of Masulipatnam. Rome seems like an inland city, but it is also a seaport. Rome's harbour was constructed by Emperor Trajan at the beginning of the second century CE. Today its thriving port (Civitavecchia) is a major cruise and ferry terminal, the main starting point for sea connections from central Italy across the Mediterranean. Yet unlike the train, airplane, or automobile, rafts, boats, ships, and the sea occupy only the edges of our consciousness. They are largely invisible and seemingly irrelevant in our everyday lives (Peters 2010).

So look around the room you are sitting in. Many of the items surrounding you would likely have travelled at one stage or another of their life in a ship, across the oceans. UNCTAD's maritime trade statistics for 2020 (with data prior to the slowdown caused by COVID-19 which reached the lowest point since the global

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financial crisis of 2008–2009) see Asia as the largest seaborne trading region. In 2019 developing economies from around the world accounted for the largest share of global seaborne trade in terms of exports and imports, loading 58% and unloading 65% of the world total. With a volume of 4.3 billion tons loaded and 6.1 billion tons unloaded, Asia's and Oceania's developing economies contributed the most to that share.

I. The Sea as Memory

Maritime history is not just about maritime economics. It is also about people, nostalgia, remembrance, and commemoration. A 2016 United Nations press release, citing Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, announced on the occasion of World Maritime Day (29 September): 'we ship food, technology, medicines, and memories'. Memories are particularly important because the ocean's reach once extended far inland and drew people into diverse circuits and exchanges

through port-cities into the hinterland maritime city, and from the maritime city into the capital city which was usually located even further from the shore.

Water has traditionally been associated with a history of rejuvenation (the Nile, the Ganga); it is conversely associated with a memory of loss (Atlantis). The holy Ganga waters form an integral part of rituals from birth to death. The unknown quality of the sea captivates writers who see it as 'unfathomable' and 'deep'. Think of Ernest Hemingway's novella of fishing for marlin in *The Old Man and the Sea*. And consider a completely different genre: Clive Cussler's best selling underwater adventures where the sea and history are active voices.

II. An Intangible Heritage

If you look at a map of the Indian Ocean, you will immediately notice India's locational centrality. Maritime archaeology has generated new spatialities across the Indian Ocean (Africa, the China seas, and even the eastern Mediterranean world), and so the East African and Southern

Chinese worlds have now been included within the ambit of 'Indian Ocean studies'. Mythologies and folk beliefs define this maritime space. The shore temples stretching in an arc from Somnath and Mahabalipuram in India to Tanah Lot and Uluwatu in Bali were not just places of worship, but also navigational aides in a spiritual waterscape. Similarly, a study of Badr Maqam shrines from Chittagong to Mergui reveals maritime circuits dotting the upper Bay of Bengal littoral, inscribed by nameless, faceless people who are now lost in history. There is presently a scramble to include such facets of tangible and intangible maritime cultural heritage within UNESCO's world heritage tag. The Indian Ocean is a harsh mistress; deities such as the Chinese Mazu, Buddhist Tara, Indian Velankanni, Javanese Nyayi Lara Kidul, and African Mami Wata (water mother) are not only powerful but vengeful. However, they can also be benign, associated with

healing, solace at sea, and asylum from storms and shipwrecks.

III. The Sea as Commons

Sea and ocean basins have figured historically as some of the principal avenues of cultural, commercial, and biological exchanges, and so the deployment of maritime categories has strong potential to highlight these processes and their effects. Maritime optics bring focus to processes such as the Columbian exchange, slave traffic, spread of disease, organisation of plantation societies, formation of diasporic communities, and the construction of global networks of trade, communication, and exchange (Bentley 1999).

But the sea is not just a theatre for imperial history. Perception of the sea as an intrinsic part of lives and livelihoods, and its use as commons, prevails despite attempts at state-regulation of maritime space (Pearson 1985; Pearson 2006). Malays see themselves as living not on land but in a waterscape called the 'Sea of Melayu' which is an imagined seascape of shared connections and a common history. Philippines' islanders view land as chaotic and the sea as peaceful; they see their coastal waters as manageable and friendly while the deep sea is considered to be the abode of malign spirits. These contradictory perceptions of ocean-space resonate in their notion of 'Olympu', a deep-sea site of mysterious events and dangerous spirits, similar to the Bengali 'Kalidaha', which denotes not just the turmoil encountered

at deep sea, but variously a crossroads, a point of passage, and a state of transition between the known and unknown.

Maritime exchange can be gleaned from various beliefs and practices that were affirmed through circulations of *objects* (for trade, diplomacy, as religious icons and gifts of power), *beliefs* (law, justice, religion, community), *peoples* (from ancient Sogdians and Palmyrenes to Europeans) and *languages* (Arabic, Creole, Portuguese, Malay, Chinese, or the later Cape Town Dutch which took words from Malay, Indo-Portuguese, and eastern African and Khoisan languages, to make a new language: Afrikaans). Maritime influences are visible in songs, rituals (for example, those celebrating Darya Lal or Darya Pir in Kutch and Khwaja Khizr in Gujarat and Bengal), cuisine (the Baba Nonya dish Chicken Kapitan of the Straits Chinese and the ubiquitous beef rendang of Indian Ocean societies are markers of identity), music (think of zanzibari *taraab* that fuses Swahili and Arab airs), and in post-colonial literature's maritime modernities that reveal the traumas of identity, loss, and displacement. It is not surprising that West Indian poet Derek Walcott saw the 'gray vault' of the sea as History.

IV. A Maritime Cosmopolitanism

The Indian Ocean fascinates writers. The earliest fables are the seven sea-borne travels of Sinbad the sailor. He is rich as opposed to his *alter ego* the poor, land-based porter Sinbad. The sea here is a metaphor for wealth, while land represents poverty and changelessness. More recently, writers have explored the sea in

different ways. Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* contrasts two very different waterscapes and two forms of spatial effectiveness and belonging: the vast, colourful space of the Indian Ocean and the smaller, grey, restrictive space of the English Channel. Kunal Basu situates *The Opium Clerk*, *The Japanese Wife* and *The Yellow Emperor's Cure* within connective waterscapes which are vehicles of memory, desire, awakening, longing, and loss. And a definite 'littoral cosmopolitanism' permeates Amitav Ghosh's novels. *In an Antique Land*, *Glass Palace*, *Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island*, and the *Ibis trilogy* are intensely pelagic, showing connections between port-towns (Cairo, Cochin, Venice, Calcutta, Madagascar, Rangoon) and people (African, European, Creole, Arab, Indian, Bangladeshi, Burmese, Chinese). Action often takes place on boats (Ibis, Mariamma), suggesting that people need a model of belonging that goes beyond national frames. In Ghosh's novels, reconstructions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on sea demonstrate the fluid line between legal and illegal situations. Ghosh emphasizes the clash of civilisations, the interminable languages of the Tower of Babel, and always displacement—the intermediate zone in which people from all places come together with different goals in mind (Chambers 2011).

V. Now for Some Statistics

Although maritime history is not just about global trade, we must now look at the centrality of maritime traffic in our globalized economy. Around 80% of global trade by volume and over 70% of global trade by value are carried by sea and are handled by ports worldwide. Out of which 60% of maritime trade passes through Asia, with the South China Sea (SCS) carrying an estimated one-third of global shipping. The SCS's waters are critical for China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Philippines, Japan, and South Korea, all of which rely on the Melaka Straits which connect the South China Sea and, by extension, the Pacific Ocean with the Indian Ocean. China has over 60% of its trade in value, travelling by sea, and its economic security is closely tied to this sea, which explains its policy toward neighbouring nations and attempts to dominate global supply chains. This hegemony explains the anxieties that led to the formation of the QUAD grouping (USA, India, Australia, Japan) to combat China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific. 70% of India's trade by value is handled by maritime transport. The Government of India launched the Sagarmala Programme in March 2017, with a vision of port-led development and growth of logistics-intensive industries, but the pace is much slower than that of China which does not just dominate trade in the Indo-Pacific, but world trade in general.

VI. So, What is Maritime History?

It is now time to ask ourselves: can sea and ocean basins be valid categories of historical analysis? The issue hinges on the degree of social and economic integration between human communities over the waters. Basins have tremendous value as constructs bringing large-scale historical processes into clear focus. Alternative frameworks, including continents, civilizations, areas, and most especially national states, have such structured conceptions of the world that scholars often do not even recognize the depth of basin influence. Such received constructs make limited provision for processes of commercial, biological, and cultural exchange that have

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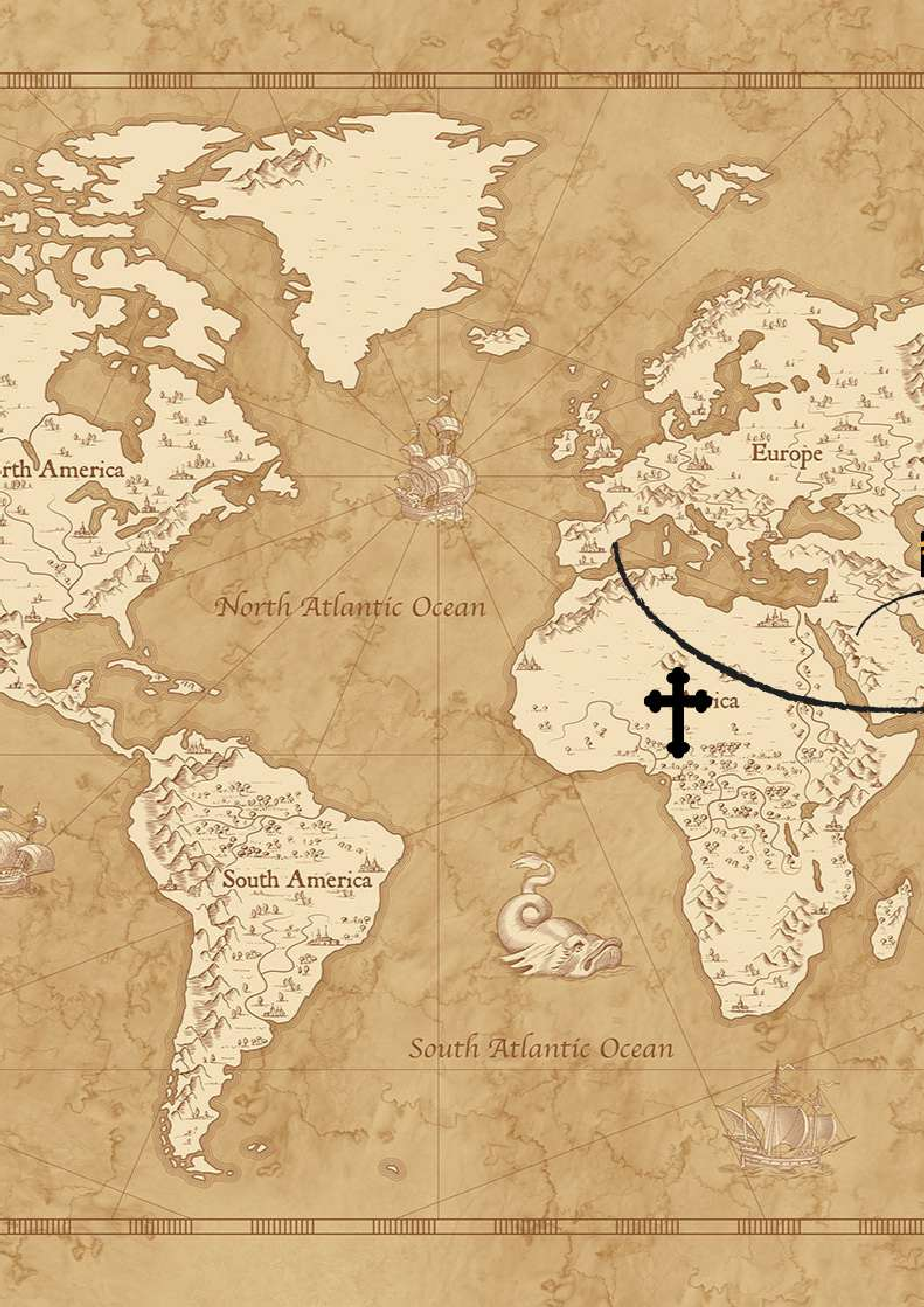
profoundly influenced the development of human societies—or at least scholars who employ these frameworks have not usually preferred to examine processes of exchange (Bentley 1999).

We can define maritime history as: 'the study of human interaction with and activity at sea. It covers a broad sub-field of history that often uses a global approach, although national and regional histories remain predominant. As an academic subject, it crosses the boundaries of standard disciplines, focusing on understanding humankind's various relationships to the oceans, seas, and major waterways of the globe. Nautical history records and interprets events involving ships,

shipping, navigation, and seafarers. Maritime history is a broad overarching subject that includes fishing, whaling, international maritime law, naval history, history of shipping, ship design, shipbuilding, history of navigation, history of various maritime-related sciences (oceanography, cartography, hydrography, climatology, etc.), sea exploration, maritime economics and trade, shipping, leisure (yachting, seaside tourism), history of lighthouses and aids to navigation, cultural contacts by sea, maritime themes in literature and art, the social worlds of sailors, passengers and sea-related communities' (after Wikipedia).

VII. The Sea and India

Despite the ubiquity of water and the maritime domain's importance, the relation between humans and water is inadequately studied, given that capitalism's spatiality, along with social perception and regulation of the sea, underwent a transformation in mid-eighteenth-century Europe. The new spatiality influenced maritime perceptions and fiscal policies worldwide. At the root of this change in political economy lay new opportunities for investing in land. The industrial era's rationalist 'development discourse' justified the reification of developable places i.e. land, and denigrated the spaces in-between. The



North America

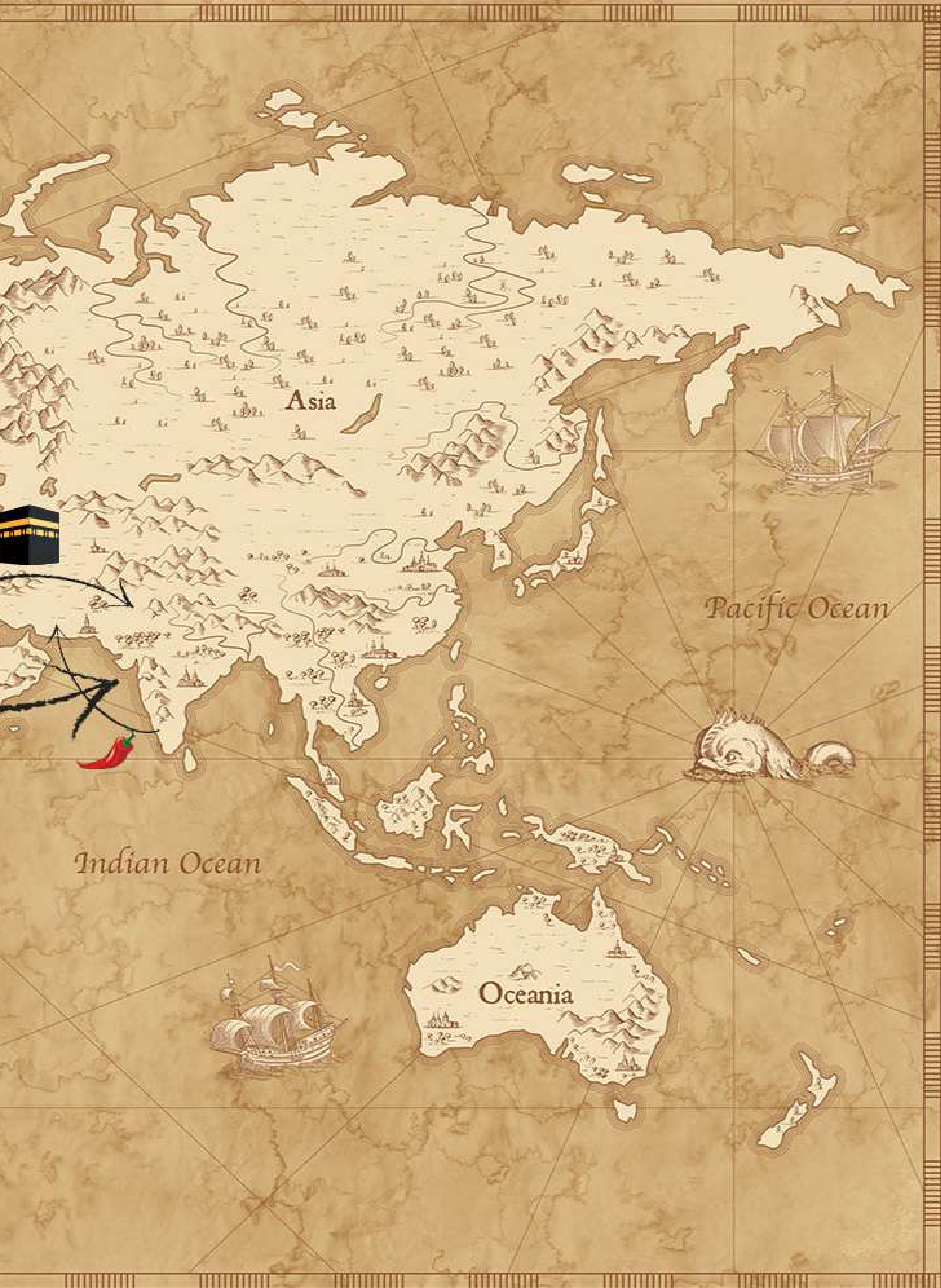
Europe

North Atlantic Ocean



South America

South Atlantic Ocean



Asia

Pacific Ocean

Indian Ocean

Oceania



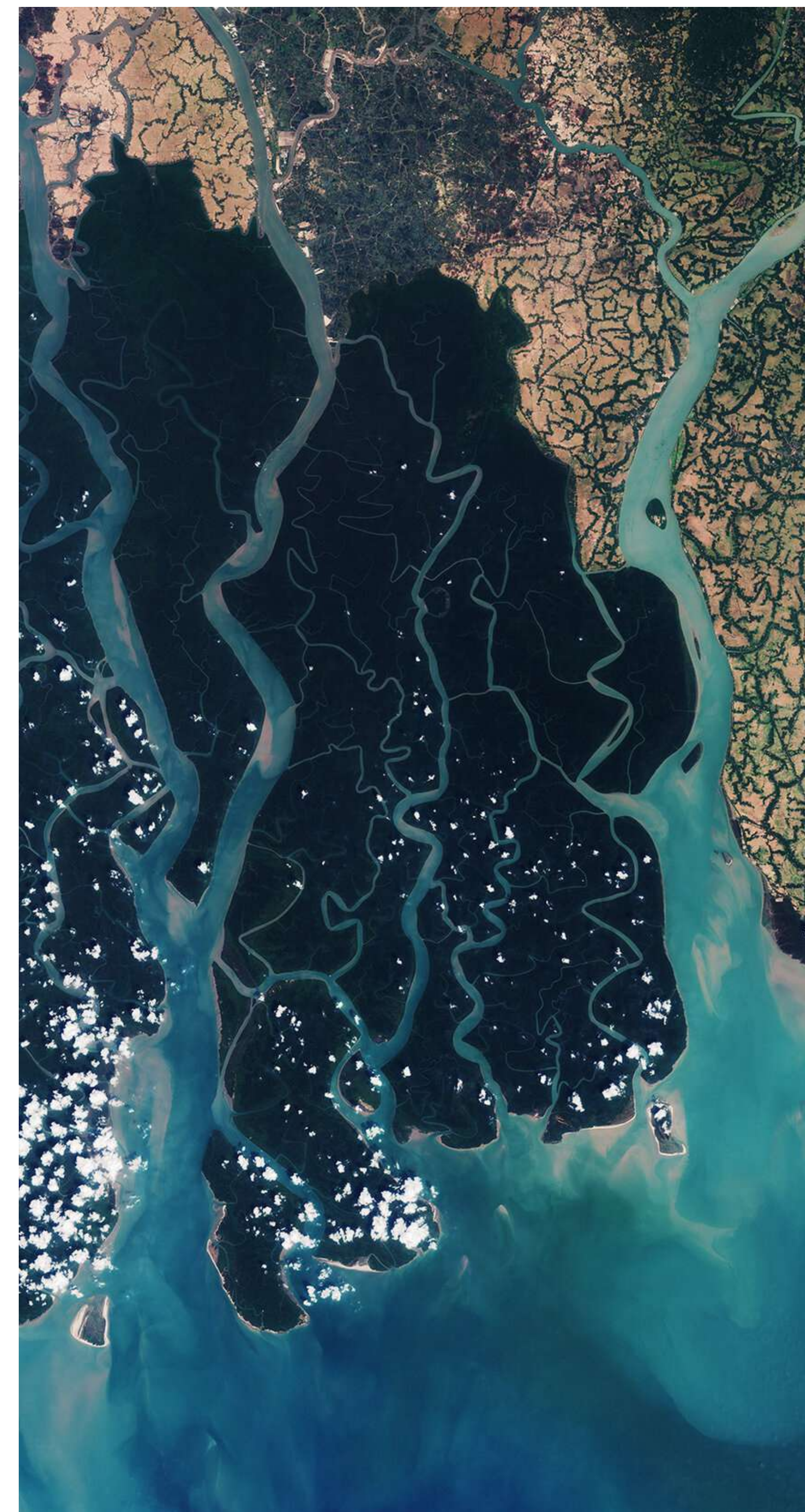
ocean became discursively constructed as an empty space, far removed from terrestrial society's progress, civilization, and development. Rather than the sea being central to landed life, it became separated. Emphasis was placed on the terrestrial sphere and the development of land pockets within the capitalist enterprise (Steinberg 2001).

Growing European power in India gave Europeans a growing share of the region's trade and led to greater integration with the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans. A death knell was rung by the steamship's arrival, which made the monsoonal patterns of Indian Ocean sailings irrelevant. Railways, connecting the interior to port-towns, altered the movement of goods and generated new mobilities and spatialities. The old Indian Ocean disappeared. Historians of the nineteenth century turned elsewhere, above all to the great land empire making up the British Raj. Sailing ships and trading voyages were replaced in the archive, and in history books, by discussions of land revenue, property rights, and the organisation of Indian society. So far as the ocean did engage historians, it was simply as an arena in which Britain demonstrated its imperial hegemony over other European powers, and at the expense of millennia-old indigenous maritime activities that had crumbled.

Continuing this tradition, independent India's obsession with its 15,000 km of land frontiers resulted in further

neglect of its rich maritime tradition. Land frontiers legalize control over mobility; herding people inside is easy, and frontier control can keep invaders out (this was never successful, as students of history know). The absence of India's coastline of a little over 7,500 km (more than half of its land frontier) from university curricula is the product of a deliberate 'maritime blindness'. Refusal to accept maritime history as a valid component of historical inquiry rises from the fact that it crosses national frames. This sub-field is considered subversive and seen to be detrimental to the history of the nation, which is of course written from the nation's point of view. This attitude makes it possible to marginalize outsiders as 'invaders' and dismiss practices not conforming to a sastric framework as 'foreign'.

Given this denial, India's external reach in historical time can be viewed, not in terms of inhabiting a shared space whose meaning has radically changed over time, but as a 'civilizational' history that is uniquely 'Indian'. History-writing betrays an acute fear of cross-cultural exchanges and 'foreign' influence, although Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Islam—seemingly terracentric religions—had pronounced maritime facets (we now talk of a maritime Buddhism and a maritime Islam) across the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea. Furthermore, sea and ocean basins can sometimes serve as a context in which experiences of local maritime regions take on greater clarity and deeper significance. A region such as the Indian Ocean retains a very immediate reality for most of the peoples who inhabit its littoral and port-cities. The challenge for basin



studies is to probe the connections and dynamics fueling processes of integration in individual maritime regions without losing sight either of local experiences or global interactions, in all their spatial and temporal dimensions.

VIII. The New Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean region was once a matrix of connectivities. Because of its cultural coherence, the ocean was a heuristic device, one that allowed us to consider human experience beyond the boundaries of continent and nation. However, developments



over the past half-century have affected the integrity of the Indian Ocean as a field of maritime-linked social systems. In a postcolonial epoch marked by petroleum production, the container ship, and air travel, port-cities that once defined the rim's human geography have lost their central roles as nodes of a trans-oceanic interface (Prestholdt 2015).

But seas and oceans continue to enthrall jurists, scholars, poets, and political theorists. Deleuze and Guattari (and Foucault, although he never completed that particular work) saw ocean-space as one resisting regulation. But in the seventeenth century, Hugo Grotius and John Selden moved

international law from land to sea and debated maritime rights. Oceans and seas provided a foundational grounding for twentieth-century configurations such as NATO and the Pacific Rim.

At present, much of the challenge to forces of contemporary globalization comes from communities dislocated by policies. The piracy that is denounced in international law is too often a case of fisherfolk displaced by large-scale trawler-fishing and the extension of the 22 kms (12 nautical mi) territorial maritime limit permitted by UNCLOS (United Nations Conferences on the Law of the Sea, 1982) to some 370 kms (200 nautical mi) in the case of SEZs of a sovereign state, giving the state special rights regarding the exploration and use of marine resources, including energy production from water and wind. Given this encroachment into maritime space, political imperatives (and geography) have become a formidable barrier to imaginings of historical relationships across the oceanic rim.

Maritime studies open up new ways of seeing and understanding the new spatialities that have emerged. The Sundarban delta islands which are geopolitically partitioned between India and Bangladesh lie in a borderless, constantly mutating zone between land and sea where the freshwater of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers deposit their silt and mix with the saline water of the Bay of Bengal. Neither liquid nor solid, the organization of this fluid archipelago is an anti-pattern, what Lindsay Bremner characterizes as 'undifferentiated, oozy, squelchy,

materialising and dematerialising in an on-going process of deposition, accumulation, stabilisation, erosion, ebb and flow'. This anti-pattern results in a fragile economy that provides a sludgy protective barrier to the intensely cultivated and populated lands of Kolkata and Dhaka. Its amphibious, muddy logic are both threatened by and offer a strategy of resistance to forces of globalization. Attempts to reclaim the delta islands as 'national' territory are evidence of current cartographic and juridical instruments that recuperate sea as land, and run counter to the old idea of shared maritime space as a complex, incremental, multi-scaled assemblage of relational economies and networks. Such sites are not discrete entities with singular, stable identities, something usually associated with architecture, cities, and territory; they only exist as components in the circuit boards of complex global circulations and flows, none of which are linear, certain, or predictable (Bremner 2014)

The absence of India's coastline of a little over 7,500 km (more than half of its land frontier) from university curricula is the product of a deliberate 'maritime blindness'.

Concluding Remarks

Maritime studies contribute to an emergent and important sub-field of History. They are also subversive as they enable the student to grapple with the chaos, disorder, ruptures, and discontinuities that seas bring in their tow to enable them to engage with both the particular and the universal. Maritime history challenges traditional models of linear and totalizable historiography and reveals tensions between scales of historical inquiry—macro and micro—along with their spatial and temporal expansiveness and/or contractions. This is global or even world history at its best, approaches that are very much in vogue and currently on the academic agenda worldwide. ■

Want to read more about the Indian Ocean?

SANJEEV SANYAL

THE OCEAN OF CHURN

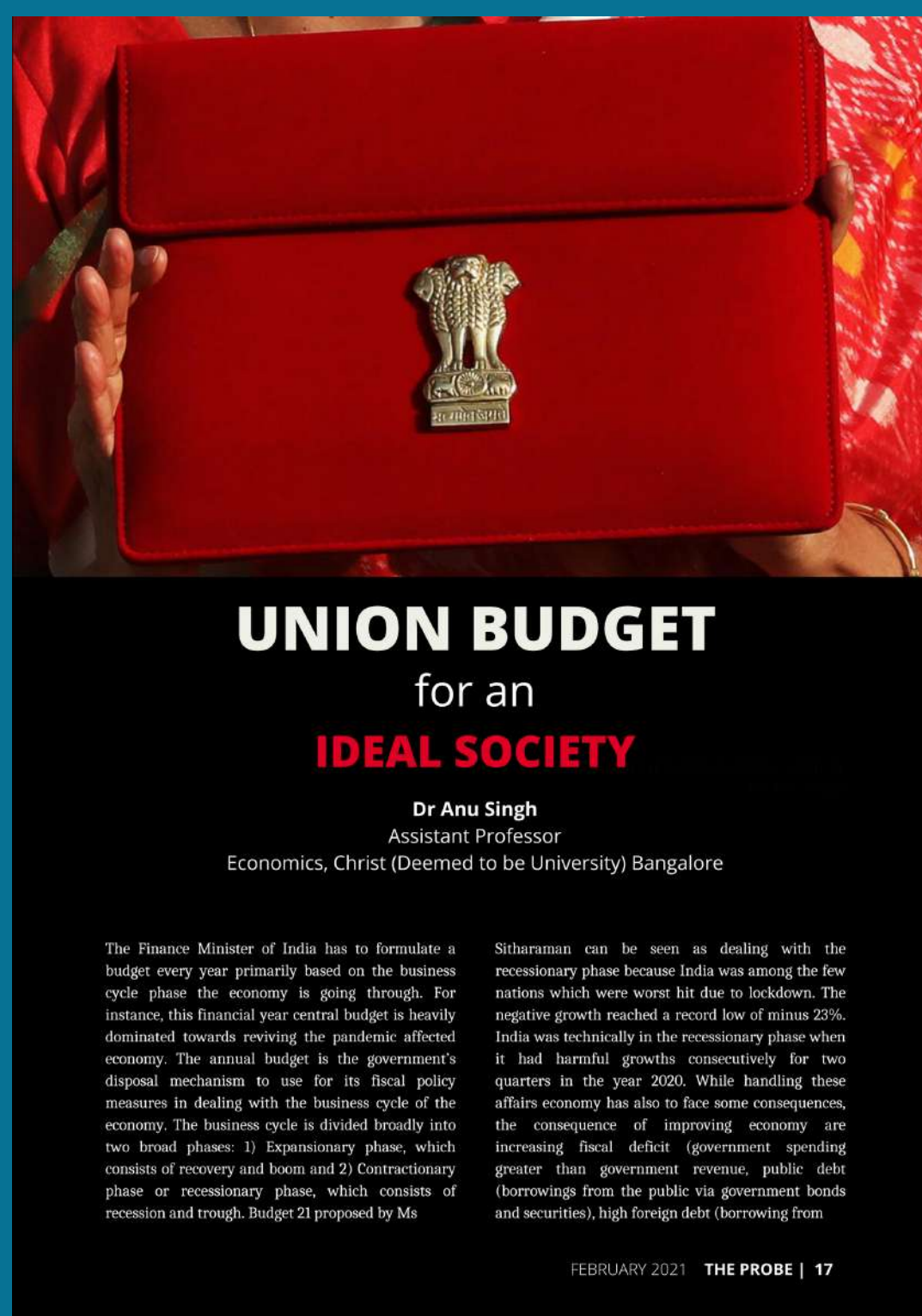
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FEB ISSUE

Journalist Mayur Bora on Human Attitude and Development

Expert View
Human Attitude and Development
 Mayur Bora



Mr Mayur Bora is a well-known author, social commentator and motivational speaker. He took voluntary retirement from a senior position in NABARD recently in order to devote more time for his passion of reading and writing.

Academics and policymakers sometimes find it difficult to restrain themselves from slipping into the restrictive straitjacket of theory. As a result, their analysis of the impact of human attitude on the process of state-induced development from a practical perspective remains somewhat infirm and indirect. Their difficulty clearly underscores the one with which scholars of this ticklish relationship between human attitude and development get foregrounded. This apparent intricacy or messiness in the connection does not indicate its lack of importance or tenuousness. Rather, even at the risk of being branded as a prisoner of platitudes, I would prefer to stick my neck out and state in unequivocal terms that both, to a large extent, are inextricably intertwined. At least, many watershed historical events of human civilisation from time immemorial go a long way in buttressing that fact. The relationship between people's attitude and developmental process spanned over millennia as well as across the continents.

Any dispassionate observer of human behaviour would agree that the positive or negative effect of human attitude on development is increasingly getting sharpened with the passage of time. As a result, in modern times, no one, either directly or remotely connected with development can afford to underestimate the importance of an attitude of the people, for whom those developmental initiatives have been undertaken. Needless to say, if those developmental initiatives pertain to rural areas, different attitudinal responses of the people can make that pendulum of performance oscillate more vigorously between the two extremes of spectacular success and disquieting defeat. As life can't be described only in black and white due to the preponderance of shades of grey in between, similarly, the developmental process gets stuck in the middle of success and failure most of the time. Of late, in the Indian context, it has turned out to be a colossal challenge for scholars, academics, politicians, government officials, bankers and social activists to tilt that pendulum towards the common goal of public welfare. As far as the results of many developmental initiatives are concerned, the writing on the wall, as well as on the consciousness of the educated and enlightened class is lead and clear. It is mixed, to say the least.

Although the mixed nature of results is due to several commonly known factors bedeviling the whole process of development, our efforts here would be limited to the study of the attitude of the common welfare state, the government plays the most important role in 'nurturing' its various developmental programmes with the ultimate objective of ensuring the livelihood security of its disadvantaged and

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JULY ISSUE

Expert view
Changing Tides of Economic Diplomacy
 BY AMBASSADOR ANIL TRIGUNAYAT



Economic Diplomacy is the art of prevailing and extracting the maximum advantage for a country's economic opportunities, securing markets, access to technology, attracting investments, defusing negative trade regimes and barriers, and collaborating for an effective and efficient global role base trading context and institutions. Of course, diplomacy in its traditional sense remains quite relevant where the focus was mainly on cultivating actively good political relations and all else was expected to follow. However, if one were to witness major global events of recent times it would be seen that almost all issues have hinged on trade and protectionism. President Trump, for example, had predicted almost all his so-called acerbic demarches on economic issues, be it sanctions regime and trade wars against China, Russia, EU, India, Iran or for that matter the BREXIT issue in general, Trump has taken credit for slowing down other economies for an interim growth of the US economy that arguably is showing good numbers. But these are extreme steps by the biggest economy as they will eventually hurt the liberal global trading regime irreparably.

China's trade practices have also created a major hurdle for the global trading regimes as it is the largest trading partner of most major economies. India will also have to brace for it as it directly impacts its crucial economic interests as in the wake of the pandemic it has been forced to take recourse to 'Atmanirbhar - Self Reliance' to cope with the adverse impact, to develop its competitive edge and be part of global value and supply chains as the world is increasingly becoming more protectionist.

Pandit Nehru, who mostly acted as his own Foreign Minister, had charged the Ministry of External Affairs with the task of economic diplomacy so that the newly independent country could get the requisite capital, technology and assistance for laying the foundations of a modern and strong industrial India. The trend continues. PM Narendra Modi placed a great emphasis on it by reaching out globally for the 'Make in India' and several other initiatives while working to improve competitive parameters through economic reforms, changing archaic rules and converting 'Red Tape into Red Carpet'. Consequently, India has emerged as a favourite destination. Ranking in 'Ease of Doing Business' has



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Ambassador Trigunayat on Changing Tides of Economic Diplomacy

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