

Maritime History: An emerging perspective

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Abstract

The genre of history writing has evolved in many ways during the last century. From a mere reproduction of the life and events of emperors and courtesans, history had firmly established itself as an autonomous scientific discipline which is more empirical and employs several other auxiliary disciplines and techniques in its manuals of methodology in order to produce a ‘total history’. Such a historiographic revolution led to the division of history into various emerging sub-fields such as economic history, social history, subaltern history, history of science, women history etc. This paper throws light on one such subset of history – maritime history and discusses the future prospects of writing a maritime history of India or the history of Indian Ocean.

Keywords- Maritime history; historiography; Indian Ocean; maritime trade

Introduction-

Ideas about history and historiography have undergone a profound change in the past few decades. The twentieth century witnessed a major transformation in historical thought. While traditional historiography focused on individuals, especially “great men” as the subject matter of history, the new forms of social-science- oriented history emphasized more on social structures and processes of social change. In this sense social science approaches whether Marxist, Annalist, or Subaltern, represented a democratization of history, an inclusion of broader segments of the population, and an extension of the historical perspective from politics to society (Iggers, 1997, pp3-4). For the historian this transformation of consciousness had several consequences. It expanded the scope of historical writing enormously. The newer histories indeed challenged the traditional historiography, which had concentrated on political and social elites, and demanded the inclusion of those segments of the population that had long been neglected (Iggers, 1997, p7). This led to the development of concepts of

'history from below' and 'total history'. Total history means a history in which stress is laid on the interrelationship between art, ideas, politics and economics. Furthermore, this transformation led to the creation of sub-genres of history such as women and gender history, economic history, social history, history of science and technology, and maritime history as future perspectives.

Maritime history is a broad theme which includes within its ambit issues such as commerce at sea, shipbuilding, port development, human migration and diaspora and many other issues of sea transportation. A student who pursues the theme may approach it from a variety of vantage points, and at the same time, touch upon a wide variety of other related approaches including science, technology, industry, economics, trade, politics, art, literature, ideas, sociology, military and naval affairs, international relations, cartography, comparative studies in imperial and colonial affairs, institutional and organizational development, communication, migration, inter-cultural relations, natural resources and so on. In short, maritime history is a humanistic study of the many dimensions in man's relationship with the sea (Hattendorf, 1995, p.5).

One of the main problems for maritime historians is the need to see events at sea in terms of a variety of perspectives. For example, a ship that was built in a particular country was a product of certain national, political, economic, social, technological and industrial factors. When the same ship sailed at sea, it entered a different realm with an international dimension that may involve such additional factors as wars, cross-cultural relations, imperial competition, scientific research, and the exchange of goods or the accumulation of capital through international trade. Moreover, the experiences which sailors gained from the long sea voyage were reflected back into the land-based societies as sailors returned from the sea and thus the maritime affairs acted as a channel of development. In this, they illustrate the relationship between core and cognate histories (Hattendorf, 1995, p.6).

The development of maritime networks have linked different societies and civilizations together, providing conduits for the exchange and distribution of goods, the projection of political and economic power and the diffusion of ideologies and culture. In broad terms these networks can be characterized as either economic or political. Economic networks are essentially trading ones, which enable states or other organization to extract, distribute, transform and consume resources such as food, metals or timber. Political networks are maritime empires or confederacies whose dominant groups direct the efforts of others to meet their own requirements. (De Souza, 2002, p.4)

Birth of Maritime history-

Although there have been several travelogues written from the ancient period by sailors and merchants but Maritime history emerged as a sub-discipline of history in the 1950s in France by the efforts of Annales School. A pioneer in this field was Fernand Braudel who through his masterpiece '*The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*' (1949) laid the foundations of maritime history. Braudel tries to see things on a global scale, and crossing the disciplinary frontiers, integrates the geographical, economic, political and the cultural into a 'total history'. His model was followed by Pierre Chaunu who took the Atlantic as his subject. His twelve-volume study (1955-60) centers on the rise and fall of the trade between Seville and the New World of the America from 1501 to 1650. Taking a global view of the subject, Chaunu was successful in integrating space into history and in dealing with the changing problems of communication. (Sreedharan, 2018, pp.264-72)

Present-day maritime history does not deal only with the great, the well-known or the successful. Those who currently study the history of the sea tend to focus instead on the millions of anonymous mariners, port-related workers and entrepreneurs on the high seas and ashore; countless cargoes consisting mainly of food products like grain, salt and fish; exotic and tropical products like spices, sugar and bananas; raw materials like cotton, coal and iron ore; and forced and voluntary passengers like slaves, convicts and migrants. It is the 'total history' of the Annales School that inspired the emergence of maritime history as a sub-discipline and which stressed an interdisciplinary approach to the past that made history the main axis for a synthesis of all the social sciences. (Harlaftis and Vassallo, 2004, p2)

Historians also have to decide what is they wish to write about when they write the history of the ocean. Maritime history, as it has been developed among the Anglo-Saxons, tends to be written by the sailor for the sailor. While no one doubts the credentials of a sailor in the field, M.N. Pearson has justly argued that it narrows the possibilities of the enquiry unnecessarily. The interaction of land and sea rather than life at sea, would seem to be the focus for historians exploring the oceanic themes (Gupta, 2001, p.280).

Maritime history of Indian Subcontinent- An Overview

Having discussed about the subject- matter and prospects of writing maritime history at length, it will not be in vague to discuss the predicaments and possibilities of producing a Maritime history of Indian subcontinent and the major themes that it will deal with. The role of merchant in Indian history has in recent years engaged the attention of historians and there has also been some discussion about

the maritime history of India. The discussions among them have produced a sharpened awareness and interest in Indian overseas trade and of the importance of the Indian Ocean for Indian history.

India has a rich maritime history dating back 5000 years. The world's first tidal dock is believed to have been built at Lothal around 2300 BCE during the Indus Valley Civilization on the Gujarat coast. A compass, Matsya yantra, was used for navigation in the 4th and 5th century AD. The words 'navigation' and 'navy' are derived from Sanskrit words 'Navgatih' and 'Nou' respectively. Boat-making and ship-building industries were found in India since ancient times.

As interest in maritime history has evolved, Indian Ocean studies represents a relatively recent and exciting development, emerging from the invaluable historical revisionism of Michael Pearson, Ashin Das Gupta, Sinnappah Arasaratnam, Himanshu P.Ray, Sugata Bose, K.N.Chaudhuri, Gwynn Campbell, Randall Pouwells, Kenneth McPherson, Ed Simpson, Eric Gilbert, John Hawley, and many others. Indian Ocean studies reveal what John Hawley describes as 'subaltern cosmopolitanism.' Its merchants and laborers circulated on its rim and across its waters, from time immemorial, as recorded for instance in the Greek Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (circa first century AD), and continue to do so today. Its more wretched travellers assimilated, to leave trace communities such as the Sidis in India and the Bombay Africans of Mombasa. Ship-building and navigation in the Indian Ocean formed other important themes of this period, to which the works of B.Arunachalam, K.S.Mathew and Lotika Varadarajan could be added as major contributions.

It will not be superfluous if we regard Indian Ocean as the 'cradle of civilization' because in the 3rd millennium BC it saw the establishment of three riverine civilizations - the Egyptian civilization, the Mesopotamian civilization and the Harappan civilization. Among these the Harappans surpassed their Egyptian and Sumerian peers in terms of population size, the sophistication of their cities and the sheer geographical reach of their civilization, and most importantly their maritime trade contacts with the Middle East. Archaeological research at sites in Mesopotamia (Iraq), Dilmun (Bahrain) and Magan (Oman) has led to the discovery of stamp seals, stone weights and colourful carnelian beads, which corroborate these references. More evidence of the maritime capacities of the Harappans is implicit with the sites of Lothal and Dholavira in Gujarat.

This maritime development continued in the Indian subcontinent in the Vedic and post-Vedic era also. The Magadha Empire under King Bimbisara of Haryanka dynasty, extended up to eastern coast, and thus trade relations started with south-East Asia. Maritime trade with Greece and Rome flourished in the Mauryan and Kushan- Satavahana dynasty. The major ports during this era include Puhar, Tyndis and Muziris. This marine development reached its zenith under the powerful Cheras, Cholas

and Pandyas in peninsular India. The Cholas under powerful king Rajaraja Chola and Rajendra Chola conquered island nations in the southern Indian Ocean as well as parts of Malaysia, Indonesia and southern Thailand. Prominent port-towns during this period were Calicut, Pattanam, Tuticorin and Mamallapuram. This was also a golden period when Indian culture, philosophy, governance, science, art, architecture and religion influenced the world and vice-versa. This glorious phase of Indian Maritime era was disturbed by the external invasions in the medieval period. Even the mighty Mughals did not pay much attention to the sea affairs.

Such a negligence of maritime trade led to the development of colonial empire in India. The forerunners were the Portuguese who discovered direct sea route to India and removed the Arabs from the trade. Later most of the European powers such as the Dutch, the English and the French developed port towns on the East and the West coasts of India.

Although the Indian subcontinent possessed such a rich maritime heritage but there are only few instances and records of shipping industries, merchants, fishing and sailing communities in early historical accounts. Although a few literary sources such as Tamil literature provide graphic accounts of fishing and sailing communities. Similarly the travelogues and accounts of Greco-Roman historians provide ample evidence in this regard such as Periplus of Erythraen Sea, Historia Naturalis by Pliny, and voyage account of Nearchus etc. Perhaps it is the time that similar data is sought in historical and archeological sources also.

Globalization in Ancient India and Maritime History-

Another important theme in Maritime History of India is the study of globalization in Ancient India. Early efforts by Radhakumud Mukherji in this field are praiseworthy when he wrote his famous book entitled 'Indian Shipping' which traces the history of the sea-borne trade and Maritime activity of the Indians from the earliest times. With regard to the Indian Ocean in antiquity, attempts have already been made to apply the notion of proto-globalization. It may be worth considering the idea of the Indian Ocean trade as a manifestation of (proto-) globalization by briefly applying the eight criteria proposed by Jennings as indicators of this phenomenon. (Cobb, 2019, p.6) Jennings 'eight hallmarks of global culture' are time-space compression (the impression of living in a smaller world); de-territorialisation (culture becomes increasingly abstracted from a local, geographically fixed context); standardization (the emergence of common 'language'); unevenness (the existence of power geometry); cultural homogenization (people coming into contact with widely shared ideas and products); cultural heterogeneity (the blurring of boundaries results in a need to stress those boundaries); re-embedding of local culture (things come into sharper relief and hence locality is

stressed); and vulnerability (places become increasingly dependent on actions that are occurring in other places).

The daily necessities of life – clothing, pottery, tools, prophylactics, and even articles of food – assumed through the application of specialized skills and artistic imagination the status of valued, luxury objects. The process of exchanging such items incorporated many different forms, social customs, ritual usage, economic considerations, and above all, the problem of distance. Furthermore, long-distance trade as an international movement of goods and people provided a measure of the role of money and prices and of the state of the arts. It could not survive without universal agreement on the notion of safe-conduct, on a law of nations, and on the means to distribute the economic gains. (Chaudhuri, 1985, pp.4-5) Maritime trade of products such as spices, silks, cotton textiles, porcelain and glass, jewellery and finely cut precious stones – supplemented by the Central Asian caravan routes, created a strong sense of unity. The idea of a common geographical space defined by the exchange of ideas and material objects was quite strong, not only in the minds of merchants but also in those of political rulers and ordinary people. (Chaudhuri, 1985, pp.20-21) The study of the factors leading to such globalization and its consequences on later events widens the scope of maritime history to a large extent.

Conclusion-

It is thus evident that the Indian Ocean presents special problems for the historian and the archaeologist. On the one hand, it provides a profusion of ethnographic data on indigenous traditions of fishing and boat-building, while on the other actual survivals of ship-wrecks are rare. It is true that documentation of any tradition of boatbuilding is of primary importance; by itself it can provide little for a study of the past. It needs to be analyzed in conjunction with data regarding other aspects of seafaring activity, viz. organization and control of trading activity, religious and cultural expansion and pilgrimage. This then makes it imperative that a judicious use be made of ethnographic studies in combination with information from historical sources. Nor should this utilization be restricted to looking for analogies for boat building techniques, but should instead cover a range of issues involving the contribution of fishing and sailing communities within a larger social context. (Ray, 2000, pp349-50)

Far more research needs to be done on several of the issues raised especially in the context of ancient India. Nevertheless a beginning has definitely been made and the field is all set to expand even though it may request nurturing. An input that is lacking both in the teaching and practice of history in India, is engagement with histories of other countries of the Indian Ocean region. It is perhaps time to support

and promote Indian Ocean studies at various levels of the academic system. Early efforts made by the SAARC countries and studies on South Asia are showing fruitful results in this direction. It's time to intensify such works in ensuing research in order to make maritime history an established genre.

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