

## Crossing the Bay of Bengal

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*Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, came out at a time when I had just begun to explore another history of the Bay through my research into the experiences of Bengali refugees who were rehabilitated in the Andaman Islands in the years between 1949 and 1971.<sup>(1)</sup> Hounded by the violence and brutality of the post-partition riots that ravaged the deltaic districts of erstwhile East Bengal in 1949, hordes of small peasants and agricultural laborers belonging to the lowest rungs of the Hindu caste hierarchy fled their homes and sought refuge in the many squalid camps of West Bengal. A new Indian government proposal for refugee rehabilitation in the small group of Andaman Islands, located in the eastern corner of the Bay, gave them the opportunity to cross the seas and seek their final refuge in a place which they were told was ‘much like Bengal’.

Yet to reach this ‘other Bengal’, they had to undertake a journey across the Bay and its dreaded waters – the *kalapaani*. Many in the Bengali settler villages of the Middle Andaman Islands said that they had no ‘caste’ hence nothing to fear – the dread of losing caste status or being socially ostracized if they crossed the waters of the Bay was not theirs. For them the Bay was the route to a safe haven – an unknown yet promising journey from where they could build their lives anew. As they boarded the SS *Maharaja* the ship that took the first batch of post-partition refugees to the Andaman Islands in late 1949, they welcomed the stormy seas as their final rite of passage to freedom and safety. The north-eastern monsoon winds blowing across Bay pushed another crossing over its waters and generated another imaginary of the sea fraught with fear, longing and hope.

Although this particular crossing of the Bay is of not of any significant concern for Amrith his study stoked questions about the sea that resonated with those of myself and my colleagues. For a focus on the waters of the Bay through the lives of those who crossed it as merchants, slaves, sojourners spoke to our own attempts to de-centre mainland Indian narratives of the Bay and put the focus back on an island and the waters surrounding it.<sup>(2)</sup> It was a project that demanded multiple imaginings of the Bay. In a beautifully evocative introduction to the book, Amrith writes,

‘Picture the Bay of Bengal as an expanse of tropical water, still and blue in the calm of the January winter or raging and turbid with silt at the peak of the summer rains. Picture it in two dimensions on a map, over laid with a web of shipping channels and telegraph cables and inscribed with lines of distance. Now imagine the

sea as a mental map; as a family tree of cousins, uncles, sisters, sons connected by letters and journeys and stories. Think of it as a sea of debt, bound by advances and loans and obligations. Picture the Bay of Bengal even where it is absent- deep in the Malaysian jungle where Hindu shrines sprout from the landscape as if washed up by the sea, left behind. There are many ways of envisaging the Bay of Bengal as a place with a history- one as rich and complex as the history of any national territory' (p. 8).

While his focus remains on the waters, Amrith takes what Matt Matsuda describes as a littoral approach that conceptualizes the Bay through 'linkages of intermediate environments from beaches and coastlines to villages, ports and harbours'.<sup>(3)</sup> His story of the Bay straddles an interdisciplinary domain that is at once theoretically informed and empirically rigorous.

Those acquainted with Amrith's broader research interests would probably know that a greater part of it has focused on the complex trajectories of Tamil migrations across the Bay of Bengal to the coastal economies of Burma and Malaysia. His book *Migration and Diaspora* has been deemed remarkable for its pioneering take on migration studies as part of a larger story of 'Asian connections'.<sup>(4)</sup> Moving away from the 'regnant paradigm' of modernization, nationalisms and the urges of territorial belonging within a state-space, Amrith drew attention to a fluid world of migrants and maritime diasporas with their multiple dwellings, their circular journeys and breaks and the ever expanding weave of material, cultural and affective bonds that connected their as lives as labourers, settlers, sojourners and migrants. He studied the conditions of these group movements and the systems that sought to constrain or enable their journeys and the emotional journeys that took shape in their everyday encounters with new people, places, and experiences.

The 'Asian connections' that Amrith explored through these stories of migration were largely those between South India and South East Asia forged by centuries of connect between the eastern littoral of the Bay with that of the South China Sea. In this narrative the primary marine focus is the Bay of Bengal that not only links Sri Lanka, the Coromandel Coast and Bengal to Burma, Thailand, Western Malay Peninsula and Northern Sumatra but also offered indirect access to the other rich markets further West. Both commodity and human traffic moved so frequently between the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea that both formed part of the wider Indian Ocean trading system. Each had its own integrating rhythms but the links between them helped determine internal systems of exchange. The crucial transit zone in this circuit was the Straits of Melaka where three interlocking systems met – one going west past the Cape Comorin, the other east to the archipelago and the South China Sea while the third reached North into the Bay of Bengal. The geographical scope of Amrith's Bay thus pivots around this critical zone of movement driven by commerce, culture, empire and mere human survival.

Given the varying rhythms of movement of these interlocking systems and their connected yet uneven implications of the life of the Bay, Amrith makes it clear that a history of this triangular basin in the Indian Ocean may not have been homogenous but did have one unifying theme – that of continuous, seasonal and circulatory migrations through its waters over centuries. What does stand out and makes this fact both distinctive and compelling are the staggering statistics that bear testimony to its singular importance of the Bay as a the most significant maritime highway within the larger Indian Ocean system.

Consider these numbers, as Amrith urges us, 'somewhere around 28 million people crossed the Bay of Bengal in both directions between 1840 and 1940'. Yet he laments, even if the region was home to one of the world's greatest migrations, it was certainly amongst the least known. He argues that although the Indian Ocean has received a fair degree of historiographical attention since the 1960s, a greater part of this attention has been focused on the western half of the Ocean and on the connections between South Asia, Persian Gulf and East Africa. Historical consensus recognized the integrating force of Islam in this circuit of commerce and culture often disregarding the fact that the littorals of the eastern half of the Indian Ocean were integrated more strongly and closely than ever recognized.

Historians like Kenneth R. Hall have recognized this aspect of the Bay's connections with South East Asia and have drawn attention to the many historical debates around the nature of the trade structure and the web

of cultural, political and connections that were forged across port polities around it. Whether conceptualized as pre-modern heterarchies or later cosmopolises, Hall argues these networked spaces were flexible, accommodative and non-hierarchical in their organizational structures, and thus 'ideal in encouraging linkages of extended communities across some substantial space, in this case maritime space as defined by movements of goods, and religious (Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic) and cultural (Indic, Arabic, Persian, Chinese, Malay or Javanese) ideas'.[\(5\)](#)

These transnational or transcultural spaces were forged through multiple regional trading networks and maritime diasporas who gave meaning to these conceptual spaces from experiences drawn both their places of origin as well as from their points of destination. These spaces were invariably plural and diverse with their hybrid imaginations and aesthetics vividly inscribed on the many temples, mosques and ordinary dwellings that dotted the littorals of the Bay. Amrith builds upon these stories of the richness of the Bay's mercantile connections from the 13th to the 15th century to move to a more compelling phase in the region's history in the years that follow.

Although the story of Europe's entry and imperial ambitions in the Bay forms the backdrop to this broad narrative, Amrith reserves his 'thick' descriptions for the second half of the 19th century when a massive increase in the scale of connectedness remade the Bay as a region at the heart of the global imperial economy. Structured by capital in search of profits in the South East Asian forest frontiers, in rubber, tin and gold, this era of the Bay's Asian and global connections were powered by the availability of cheaper fossil fuel and the technologies of steam navigation. This was the era of mass migration when thousands of ordinary people – indentured labour, penal transportees, and hundreds of already uprooted and impoverished people were compelled to cross the seas in order to survive.

Amrith looks closely into the waves of Tamil labour migration to the plantations of Malaysia and explores the material, social, cultural and ecological imprints of these movements from the shores and port cities of the Bay to the deeper forest interiors where thousands of acres of land was cleared to effect a radical reordering of space and society. Amrith's beautifully nuanced rendition of life and labour on the plantations is built around oral histories of migrant memories reserved in the National Archives of Singapore. There are stories of struggles, of hard labour, of ethnic conflict as well as of shared conviviality, of hybrid cuisines, and of new forms of leisure and religious life.

These archives evidently provide rich resource for understanding the social, cultural and political choices that migrants made in their innumerable struggles to build homes, forge identities and claim rights to land and citizenship in the face of shifting political boundaries and tentative futures in the global imperial economy.

Moving in and out from the descriptions of the quotidian to the larger political economic forces that mediated the rhythms of both migrations and migrant lives around the arc of the Bay, Amrith broadens the story of Tamil migration to reflect on the political fate of the Bay in the context of the Second World War and the rapid restructuring of the region's geopolitical status. Crossings over the Bay were first interrupted during the years of the Depression and more decisively in the years following the war when the collapse of the imperial order and reshaping of national boundaries severed the centuries old connections that bound South and Southeast Asia. As Amrith argues, the region most defined by mobility was divided by controls over trade and migration.

The latter half of Amrith's book dwells upon the fragmentation of the Bay, of emerging geopolitical rivalries of competing nation states over its waters and natural resources and the slow and yet terrifyingly visible impacts of global warming and ecological degradation along its littoral. Amrith's story laments not only the unraveling of the connected world of the Bay but of the rapid erosion of a distinctive social imaginary borne not of the cartographic urges of territorial nationalisms but of the lived world of ordinary men and women for whom the waters of the Bay were the site where solidarities were forged across cultures and cherished over generations.

Amrith's book should inspire fresh scholarship on the Bay of Bengal not only for its methodological richness but for its ability to speak across disciplines and research interests. Although the Andaman and Nicobar Islands doesn't find place in Amrith's connected world of the Bay, we discovered to our own delight that despite the presumed isolation of these Islands from the principal commercial networks of the region there was enough evidence to suggest that the presence of robust networks of informal commerce and flows of human traffic between South East Asia and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands makes them an integral part of Amrith's connected world of the Bay. In the absence of archival records or or hard evidence, these remain difficult histories to write but there are enough visual, material and linguistic trails that can lead to stories that could converge or collide with Amrith's narrative in new and unexpected ways.

In the end the enduring significance of the Amrith's book lies in its masterful rendition of a difficult story with its messy edges and elusive trails and its quiet but compelling call to reimagine a history of the sea in ways that allow us to acknowledge its agency in shaping the fates and fortunes of those who crossed it.

## Notes

1. This was part of an ESRC funded collaborative research project on the 'Integrated Histories of the Andaman Islands' undertaken with Professor Clare Anderson and Professor Vishvajit Pandya.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See Clare Anderson, Madhumita Mazumdar and Vishvajit Pandya, *New Histories of the Andaman Islands: Landscape, Place and Identity in the Bay of Bengal 1858–2014* (Cambridge, 2016).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Matt Matsuda, 'The Pacific', *The American Historical Review*, 3 (June 2006), 762.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Sunil Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia* (Cambridge, 2011).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Kenneth R. Hall, 'Ports of trade, maritime diasporas and networks of trade and cultural integration in the Bay of Bengal region of the Indian Ocean: c 1300–1500', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 53, no. 1 of 2, *Empires and Emporia: The Orient in the World Historical Space and Time* (2010), 109–45, 114–5.[Back to \(5\)](#)

### Other reviews:

New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/books/review/crossing-the-bay-of-bengal-by-sunil-s-amrith.html> [2]

Times Higher Education

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/crossing-the-bay-of-bengal-the-furies-of-nature-and-the-fortunes-of-migrants-by-sunil-amrith/2008719.article> [3]

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[3] <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/crossing-the-bay-of-bengal-the-furies-of-nature-and-the-fortunes-of-migrants-by-sunil-amrith/2008719.article>