

# Ports and Littoral Societies: A Tribute to Michael Naylor Pearson

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Studying in India in the late 1970s, some of us were introduced to what was then an exciting ‘new’ branch of history – maritime studies. For many of us, the introduction to this area of research was through Michael Pearson’s *Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat: The Response to the Portuguese in the Sixteenth Century* (1976). This work remains, for many students, a starting point for studies on maritime history, and on what he himself called the ‘indigenous response’ to the arrival of the Portuguese on the Gujarat shore.

Pearson went on to foreground the Indian Ocean, and the western Indian Ocean in particular, in much of his work. However, in 1998, in his *Port-cities and Intruders: The Swahili Coast, India and Portugal in the Early Modern Era*, he drew attention to the need to engage more meaningfully with the notion of ‘world history’, to say that ‘the important innovation of “world history” is that it is more theoretically self-conscious, that

it goes beyond finding similarities and differences, because, at least implicitly, it is grounded in a model or “theory”, and this gives it much greater analytical and explanatory power...’<sup>1</sup> Almost twenty years later, how do we move on from Pearson’s work? To frame the question rather differently, in what different directions can Pearson’s work lead us?

Broadly speaking, Pearson’s work focused on three broad themes – water history in and as world history, littoral societies, and port-cities. While his early work on India emphasized the reactions to the entry of the Europeans, the Portuguese in particular, his later writings tended to focus more on the societies of the littoral – his essays on Littoral Societies are well known – and on the points of connections. The world that he studied was therefore one that intersected in many ways – through trade, through language, through religion, and perhaps just through the shared experience of living in a world that was both fluid and firm, bordered and yet borderless, all at the same time.

Two of these themes, of water history and littoral societies, are covered in the essays that follow. Rila Mukherjee’s essay ‘Revisiting Michael Pearson’s Littoral Society’, argues that ten years after the publication of his seminal work, it is necessary to examine such societies through different lenses from those that distinguished Pearson’s work. While the earlier version of his paper on littoral society, in 1985, was primarily concerned with coastal history, his subsequent reformulation in 2006 put forward the notion of the littoral as in some sense universal, so that cultures across a littoral (the western Indian Ocean, for example) had a shared history and a ‘common heritage’. Mukherjee argues that such a notion, given the multiple ways in which historians are studying the worlds of water and the ongoing debates on the issues of space, place and time, is now insufficient. It is therefore time to look at the littoral not as ‘*the*’ littoral, but as an area, or a series of areas, that bordered both land and sea, and fed into (and off) both. Universality often

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<sup>1</sup> M.N. Pearson, *Port-cities and Intruders: The Swahili Coast, India and Portugal in the Early Modern Era*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1998, p. 6.

blurs or negates temporal notions; Mukherjee suggests that it is time we looked at how time was and is constructed in the littoral, to try and understand both the 'common heritage' of Pearson, and the local or regional variations that are clearly visible.

The next essay, that of Kenneth R. Hall, 'Upstream and Downstream Networked "Activity Zones" in 14th-16th Century Samudra-Pasai (Northeast Sumatra)' takes us further east, into the Sumatran seas. Samudra-Pasai was an 'international maritime stopover', and prior to the Portuguese takeover of Melaka in 1511, competed with that emporium for control of the commerce of the region. Taking off from Pearson's coastal littoral, and through his own concept of 'upstream and downstream linkages', Hall examines the ways in which Samudra-Pasai managed to retain its primacy in these waters for over two centuries. Through a study of the Malay literary text, the *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* and contemporary Chinese and European texts, he draws attention to the complex relations that existed in the 'activity zones' of the region, as people upstream and downstream connected with the 'coastal fleets' as well as the overland and riverine passages.

Ilicia Sprey's paper takes us further east and further north. In her essay 'The Vietnam Central Coastline and the Emergent Nguyễn State, c. 1500-1700: Port, Coastline, Hinterland Interrelations', she too builds upon Pearson's littoral society, but extends it eastwards, into a region that Pearson did not study. The re-establishment of Vietnamese sovereignty by Đại Việt's Lê emperors in the early decades of the fifteenth century was followed by an expansion southwards along the coast. In the sixteenth century, a minor branch of this family moved into the central part of the coast, and acquired control over both the coast and the rivers which gave access to the interior. In the process of this expansion, Sprey points out that the methods used by the Nguyen state involved multiple negotiations, on different grounds, with the various groups operating, resident, or migrating into the area. A complex mixture of religion, trade, and calculated economic support to the 'resident maritime

diaspora' ensured the longevity of the regime, and its ability to resist European intrusions into the area. As Sprey points out, the voluminous documents of the Dutch East India Company clearly display their prejudice against the state. Sprey also brings up another of Michael Pearson's areas of interest, that of secondary ports, in her analysis of the ways in which the Nguyen state established its upstream and downstream linkages.

Amelia Polonia's essay 'Interactions Between the Local and the Global: Brokers and go-betweens within the Portuguese State of India (1500 - 1700)' takes us away from littoral society to another aspect of Pearson's work, the role of the Portuguese in Asia. However, where Pearson was primarily concerned with the Portuguese in Indian waters, Polonia examines the role played by the Jesuits, in particular in Japan. Pearson had, in his work on Gujarat and on coastal Western India, pointed to the role of local and Portuguese interlocutors in the spread of Portuguese contacts and dominance; it is this aspect that Polonia takes up, studying the interface between the local agents and the broader Portuguese 'State of India'. One dimension that Pearson did not touch upon at all in his work is highlighted by Polonia – the role of women as agents and participants in the empire building process.

All these essays have taken Pearson's work as their starting point and gone on to question or extend his arguments. It should be pointed out that two of Pearson's major areas of concern have not been touched upon here – the western Indian Ocean, and port-cities. Littoral society is of course composed of many peoples and many occupations; but the port-city was also one of the ways of studying coastal and littoral societies. Here again, some extensions and divergences from Pearson's hypotheses can be underlined, this time, with specific reference to the west coast of India.

Pearson had put forward the idea of ports as gateways, hubs, bridge-heads or as choke points. In the same time, different ports could be any of these; but would it not also be fruitful to examine what happened with a single port over a

period of time? Cambay, for example, was a gateway into the interior; it was a commercial hub, connecting the land routes into the northwest of India and Central Asia with the Arabian Sea and with the larger Indian Ocean world; but it was also a choke-point, for its geography, at the head of a tidal gulf, imposed limitations that Surat did not have. Or, if we were to move further south, the fortunes of the ports of Karwar and Mangalore were intimately linked with both the interior states and the coastal predators, in the form of the 'Malabar pirates' – how do we study these through the lens of hubs or chokepoints? The arguments put forward by Mukherjee in this volume could also be used on the west coast: so can we study the Siddis on this coast through these lenses, as well as Pearson's older argument of an 'amphibious' world? The Siddis drew sustenance from land holding, undoubtedly, but this land was granted to them because of their control of the coastline. Again, here, despite what Pearson had to say about a 'state-centric' and 'land-based' view of the sea, we would perhaps have to take note of the role of the state, on both sides of the Arabian Sea, to understand not just the linkages, but also the discontinuities, in the networks of contact.

Crucial to the port cities was of course the hinterland. The hinterland of one of the ports that Pearson focused on, Surat, was the entire Mughal Empire. Ports like Cambay, or Karwar, or Mangalore did not have that large a hinterland, but had access to Gujarat and the northern land based route to central Asia in the case of the first, and the Deccan heartland in the case of the other two. All these had networks of trade that linked them both to the interior and to the lands across the sea and along the coast. Predators of course existed; but it should also be remembered that it was on the west coast that two of the major challenges to the establishment of European power were centred, in the form of the Maratha admiral Kanhoji Angre in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, and in the person of Martanda Varma, who established the kingdom of Travancore in Malabar in the first half of the eighteenth century. Going back to Pearson, can we see these as a different kind of 'indigenous response'?

Yet another area into which Pearson's work can take us is the issue of the labor markets. Who were the ubiquitous 'lascars' of the European records? Who worked in, for instance, the docks of Swally Marine or Cambay, and where did these workers come from? Were they drawn from across India, or perhaps from across the Bay or the Arabian Sea? When ships had to stay over in an Indian port during the monsoon, the merchants on board would of course have had local contacts and perhaps residences; but what about the sailors? Another question that can be raised is that of technology transfer / exchange. Working on the early modern world, we are often short of sources to answer the questions that we ask, but that cannot prevent us from asking them anyway. Did ship building techniques change because of the European presence? We do know from the English records that they got some small ships built on the coast of India, for use in coastal shipping and particularly in the freight trade of the coast, and it would be interesting to see if we could perhaps find some indication of similar techniques being used on other, non-European ships as well.

Networks of trade, contact, knowledge, both formal and informal, existed across the Indian Ocean world. Once again going back to Pearson's emphasis on the need to engage more meaningfully with world history, we also need to examine the ways in which the world of the Indian Ocean merchant or trader or sailor or political entity engaged with the many worlds, and the cross-cultural connections that emerged, were sustained, or were abandoned in the course of the time that Pearson has been most concerned with, the early modern period.

Finally, in his later writings, Pearson also began to question the terminology of 'Western Indian Ocean', to argue that this region should perhaps be termed the 'Afrasian Sea' instead. This is one aspect of his writings that has not been picked up so far, at least by Indian historians. The use of this word would also take us beyond the chronological boundaries of the 'early modern', for it would be necessary to examine the development and the sustenance of contacts over a longer

period. Littoral societies, ports and world history would all have to be studied through multiple lenses, and perhaps we could then write a better 'water history' than Pearson said was currently possible.

These essays are all derived from Michael Pearson's works, and all take Pearson's initial hypotheses in multiple directions. Such departures would not have been possible without his initial contributions, and Michael Pearson has always been willing to listen to what others have to say. He often said that he had been a 'shameless magpie' in his work, taking whatever interested him, from many diverse fields. We have also been magpies, but in reverse – borrowing from his work, we have gone into diverse fields.