

the periphery as those of the core, as the historical development of Singapore demonstrates.

Despite the absence of certain lines of inquiry, *Bonded labour and debt* makes a significant contribution to global economic history. The work is both a foil to, and extension of, Atlantic history, as economic and labour models from New World colonial experiences were adopted and adapted within the globalized realities of neo-imperialism in the Old World. Regrettably, decolonization did not bring the necessary reforms to lessen the region's reliance on bonded labour. Isabelle Guérin's examination of contemporary debt bondage in the brick, sugar cane, and rice industries of Tamil Nadu state reveals that 'owners of capital are exploiting intensively cast institutions to control labour', despite decades of government intervention and oversight (p. 132). The historical traditions which continue to influence forms of IOW labour today certainly merit further research.

### Crossing the Bay of Bengal: the furies of nature and the fortunes of migrants

By Sunil S. Amirth. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013. Pp. 268. 22 halftones, 3 maps. Hardback £22.95, ISBN 978-0-674-72483-9.

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This is a beautifully written and sophisticatedly crafted book about migration in the Bay of Bengal, pivoting on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It reads like a novel. Sunil S. Amirth, a Reader at Birkbeck College London, has the gift of mesmerizing his readers by unearthing forgotten stories about ordinary individuals who made – and lost – their fortunes crossing the Bay of Bengal. If not a novel itself, the book is certainly inspired by novelists such as Joseph Conrad, Michael Ondaatje, and in particular Amitav Ghosh, who, like Amirth, are very much moved by the phenomenon of human migration and the cross-cultural encounters it entails. Hence, Amirth tells wonderful 'road stories', stories that go beyond the boundaries of the modern nation-state and go against claims that it is the nation that inevitably determines people's attachment and identity. But what makes this book really

appealing as a scholarly work is the author's capacity to weave individual stories, unveiled from archives and collected during fieldwork, into a richly textured biography of a region: the Bay of Bengal. Like the peripatetic heroes of his book, Amirth proves himself to be a master in crossing the Bay. As a scholar, he courageously attempts to (re)connect the separated national archives and histories of South and Southeast Asia. By doing so, he convincingly demonstrates that, although people moved back and forth, migration within the Bay of Bengal at this time was comparable in both size and impact to that of the Atlantic.

Amirth argues that, although it was built upon a pre-existing pattern of circulation and movement, the unprecedented migration of labour across the Bay during the second half of the nineteenth century was engendered by imperial conquest and global capitalism. The latter was facilitated by technological breakthroughs such as the Suez Canal, steamships, and railways, all giving easier access to ever more Burmese rice, Sri Lankan tea, and Malayan rubber. These created a huge demand for labour, provided by the Indian subcontinent. Obviously, the result was not only a rise in cross-cultural cosmopolitanism but, equally importantly, an increasingly ruthless exploitation (p. 129: 'blood and dirt') of migrant (enslaved, convicted, or indentured) labour and the natural environment. The book charts in fascinating detail how labour, and to a lesser extent finance, was mobilized, and how this differed across the Bay. Amirth predominantly focuses on the role of the South Indian Tamils and Telugus in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Malaya.

In and after the 1930s, this extensive movement of labour came to an end as a result of the global economic crisis, Japanese conquests, and decolonization. Moreover, through a new emphasis on national boundaries and the increasing importance of citizenship, new, more rigid national identities were imposed on the cosmopolitan migrants all across the Bay of Bengal. Amirth clearly deplors this development, the more so since ecological disaster is now threatening the region as a whole and can only be tackled by the close cooperation of various national governments. Nevertheless, despite the fact that his book emphasizes the dark side of human exploitation and ecological devastation, his message seems to be that we can and should learn something positive from the connected, more cosmopolitan pasts of the Bay of Bengal. He argues that in order to be able to face the current ecological challenge we should see 'the Bay of Bengal whole

again' (p. 275). On this moralizing note Amrith ends this engaging and imaginative book in which he demonstrates the long-forgotten connectivity between the micro and the macro levels, between South Asian and Southeast Asian studies, and, finally, between migration history and ecological history.

The author's decision to frame a history of migration as a history of a region, however, raises problems of spatial and temporal understanding. To start with the former, taking the Bay of Bengal as a spatial category suggests that it works as a relatively enclosed maritime world in itself. In other words, the coasts are viewed as being more connected to each other than to their respective hinterlands. Unfortunately, Amrith hardly discusses the role of the interior. When he does, he tends to contrast a relatively static agrarian interior with a dynamic coast (p. 41). According to him, the very characteristic that defines the Bay of Bengal is movement. For example, he takes for granted that Sufi mystics spread Islam from the coast to the interior instead of the other way round (p. 37). In my opinion, this dichotomy is hard to maintain. Until the nineteenth century, the interiors of the subcontinent and much of Southeast Asia were as connected to the outside world as the coastal regions. Similarly, the courts of the interior were at least as cosmopolitan as the ports at the coast. Moreover, there was no natural zero-sum game between overland and overseas trade as suggested by Amrith in the case of China (p. 17). Apart from the far-fetched Chinese example, however, there is no place in the world where coast and hinterland were as closely linked to each other as on the east coast of the Indian subcontinent. Since Amrith neglects basic geography, he fails to make the Bay of Bengal tick as a spatial category.

This problem of spatiality is linked to temporality when Amrith repeatedly stresses European agency in integrating the Bay into global systems of exchange. This process had already started in the fifteenth century, when, after a lull of a few centuries, European expansion 'both revived and transformed the region' (p. 17; but this contradicts p. 61, where the Europeans are called 'parasitic'). However, the region had long before become an international hub due to increasing trade, the spread of Islam, and (an element that Amrith completely ignores) Theravada Buddhism. Instead of hindering maritime integration, a cooling global climate may actually have pulled the economies of the interior to the coast, hence anticipating a development that would become more prominent when the Europeans

entered the region. Looking at the evidence for the early modern period, it seems that Amrith's numerous examples of Arab, Ottoman, Persian, Gujarati, Malabari, and Chinese involvement in the Bay of Bengal hardly support the idea of a relatively enclosed space.

Although Amrith stresses a sharp break in the Bay of Bengal's development after the nineteenth century, the difference he makes is a quantitative (p. 103: 'trickle became a torrent') and qualitative one (p. 180: 'social imaginaries'), *not* a spatial one. It is clear, though, that the Bay described in the early chapters is much more extensive and open than the more intensive and closed Bay under imperial rule depicted in the later chapters. This sea change was engendered by, first, British imperialism (p. 74: 'soldiers came first') and, second, global capitalism (p. 83: 'labor followed'). In descriptions of this period we do not read anything any more about Thailand or the Indonesia Archipelago – despite the fact that the border between Malaysia and Indonesia 'makes little historical or cultural sense' (p. 99) – and it is clear that the Bay of Bengal has become a British lake (p. 197). All of this raises the question whether the book is really a balanced and integrated history of the Bay as a region or just one more, albeit very sophisticated, British imperial history about south Indian migration, based primarily on what used to be the British imperial archive. Similar doubts emerge because the book lacks a thorough economic analysis that would demonstrate the increasing integration of the region and that might have provided the intermediate level to link the lives of individuals even better to the life of the region as a whole. Hence, despite its many laudatory features, Amrith's work is far too fragmentary to serve as a holistic Braudelian oceanic biography.

Finally, as it is the book's objective to give voice to a forgotten region, it is remarkable that the indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia are hardly given room to speak in this study. They only appear on stage at the end to spoil the story of the splendid Bay's cosmopolitanism. It is quite telling that, in this account, the Burmese nationalists of the late 1930s look forward to a future that is free not from British but from Indian domination (p. 188). It thus seems that the local populations were hardly affected by the arrival of millions of Indian migrants. Besides, seeing the Bay of Bengal as a highway (even 'corridor', p. 28) between India and China (p. 1) may raise eyebrows among the many followers of the 'autonomous history' of the region, who deplore overly one-sided interpretations of Indianization as

disseminated earlier by European and Indian scholars and activists (see also p. 174). Although Amrith gives the very important Chinese migrants their due, the Indians remain centre stage. By only paying attention to Indians, especially Tamils, the author paints a picture that is not very different from the one created by John Sydenham Furnivall, who wrote

about the region as a medley of peoples: 'they mix but do not combine' (p. 148). Hence should we, like Amrith, really be surprised that the Bay of Bengal never provoked powerful emotions of attachment (p. 189) or that it never developed as an *idea* (p. 284)? Even with this enchanting book in hand, it is still too early to tell.