

Review Article

Unconnected arches

India and the Islamic heartlands: an eighteenth-century world of circulation and exchange

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Mobile citizens: French Indians in Indo-China, 1858–1954

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In 1748, Sayyid Muṣṭafā, a Shīʿī from Bengal, was crossing the Arabian Sea bound for Karbalā in Iraq, home of the Al-ʿAbbās mosque and the shrine of Al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī. Sayyid Muṣṭafā sought at once to make a pilgrimage, to seek out his family tree, and to engage in commerce. But a change in the winds forced his ship to turn back. Temporarily stranded on the Malabar coast of India, and with his journey much delayed, he penned several letters in Persian to those awaiting his return in Bengal. He missed them profoundly, especially his beloved son, Sayyid Murtaḍa. Sayyid Murtaḍa was on the threshold of maturity, and his father sent him admonitions on how to behave towards

others and on the importance of an appropriate work ethic. In return, Sayyid Muṣṭafā begged his son for news of ‘the reality of your constitution and work, and about the circumstances of the children’ (Sood, p. 272). In his letters home, Sayyid Muṣṭafā reveals that the world he inhabited spanned empires, languages, religious traditions, oceans, seas, and vast parts of the Eurasian landmass.

So too did the world of Darmenaden Prouchandy, more than a century later. Prouchandy was a Tamil and a French citizen from the coastal trading post, or *comptoir*, of Pondicherry. In 1870, he arrived in Saigon, the capital of the recently established French colony of Cochinchina. Prouchandy made his living supplying milk and other sundries, such as matches, corks, mosquito nets, and soap, to military hospitals in Saigon and the coastal town of Bà Rịa. By 1891, he also owned two steamboats, one of which, the *Alexandre*, carried passengers and post from Hà Tiên, a coastal port on the Gulf of Siam, to Phnom Penh, the capital of the French protectorate of Cambodia. As a French citizen, Prouchandy was eligible for, and sought, subsidies from the colonial government for the service that he operated. But the colonial government demurred. The *Alexandre* was an inferior vessel—its speed barely rivalled that of the current—and, according to one colonial administrator, it was ‘old, infected and completely inadequate’ (Pairaudeau, p. 115). It could not compete with the subsidized services of the larger French-owned Compagnie des Messageries Fluviales.

Despite Prouchandy's French citizenship, the colonial government did not regard him as equal to French citizens from France—or so, at least, he came to feel.

The stories of Sayyid Muṣṭafā and Darmenaden Prouchandy come from different time periods and take place in different world regions. They appear in books with profoundly different objectives and intellectual orientations. But both stories vividly illustrate how personally varied, culturally entangled, and expansive in geographical scope were the everyday lives of ordinary people before the establishment of the modern system of nation-states. The world in which Sayyid Muṣṭafā lived and moved in the middle of the eighteenth century was politically fragmented: the Safavid empire had collapsed; the Mughal emperor was little more than a figurehead in Shahjahanabad; and the Ottoman empire was loosely knit together from various otherwise autonomous districts and provinces. Political regimes such as those in Awadh, Bengal, Hyderabad, Arcot, Baghdad, Egypt, Gujarat, Rohilkhand, Rajputana, Panjab, highland Yemen, Syria, northern Iraq, and various tribal confederacies all rivalled the old imperial centres. And yet spanning this broad region was a 'coherent, self-regulating arena of activities' which existed beyond any one political dominion (Sood, p. 12). This arena—Islamicate Eurasia—coincided with but transcended traditional geographical areas such as *al-Hind* (the Indian subcontinent), *Jazīra al-'Arab* (the Arabian peninsula), the *Mashriq* (the Arab world east of Egypt), the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Arabian Sea. The arena achieved its coherence through the objects, signs, ideas, and information that circulated within it 'under the auspices of a broad spectrum of associations—family households, spiritual fraternities, ethnic communities, trading diasporas, contractual partnerships—and exhibited a diverse array of linguistic, occupational and religious commitments'

(Sood, p. 17). This system of circulation and exchange produced what we might think of as 'family resemblances', in understandings of the cosmos, kinship practices, social relations, forms of writing and communication, and political order, which gave the region definition. A man such as Sayyid Muṣṭafā could travel from Bengal to Iraq, spend time detained on the Malabar coast, and send letters to his son with the belief that they would eventually be delivered, because he recognized those family resemblances.

Darmenaden Prouchandy, in contrast, moved across regions that were spanned and made intelligible by the French colonial empire. Pondicherry, from which he came, had come under French dominion in 1674. By the middle of the nineteenth century, it was the capital of the little that remained of the French empire in South Asia. In 1862, however, the French forced the Vietnamese court at Huế to cede to them the three south-eastern provinces of Định Tường, Biên Hòa, and Gia Định. Sài Gòn became the capital of the new French colony of Cochinchina and a bridgehead for French expansion in Southeast Asia. French Indians sought opportunities in the civil service and with private French interests in the new colony. They resided in Sài Gòn, in the neighboring predominantly Chinese city of Chợ Lớn, and in the towns of the Mekong delta. They also took up residence in Phnom Penh, Hà Nội (which would become the capital of French Indochina), and the northern port city of Hải Phòng. By the Second World War, almost 3,000 residents of French Indochina came from French India, almost 2,000 of whom were legally recognized as French citizens. These citizens, like Prouchandy, had renounced traditional South Asian civil practices and agreed to be governed by the French Civil Code. As a result, they were known as *les renouçants* ('renouncers'). The colonial administration would contest the

privileges associated with French citizenship that the *renonçants* claimed and they, in turn, would fight to preserve their rights. As French citizens, they were eligible to vote and could influence the outcome of colonial elections. This inspired resentment among Vietnamese reformers, who came to view the *renonçants* as an obstacle to their own participation in the political life of the colony. The *renonçants* represented themselves in colonial society both as modern and cosmopolitan, and as inheritors of the legacy of ‘Greater India’ that had shaped Southeast Asia in the distant past. In the decades of conflict that moulded French Indochina after the beginning of the Second World War, the *renonçants* skilfully navigated among the colonial Vichy government, the Free French in French India, the nominally pan-Asian Japanese military regime, the anticolonial forces led by Subhas Chandra Bose, revanchist French colonial forces, and the communist-led Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội (‘League for the Independence of Vietnam’).

The lives of Sayyid Muṣṭafā and Darnaden Prouchandy have left traces in diverse and difficult documentary sources scattered across the globe. In 1748, the *Santa Catharina*, a vessel of 220 tons burden, was sailing from the port of Basra, bound for Chandannagar, on the return leg of a freight voyage. The owners were Portuguese subjects, but the ship carried several French passengers. Off the Coromandel coast, the *Santa Catharina* encountered the *Medway’s Prize*, a British man-of-war, which ordered it to stop. Britain was at war with France over the issue of the Austrian succession and all French vessels and cargos were liable to seizure and forfeit. In addition to the chests of silver, coral, Venetian necklaces, glass, pearls, gems, and assorted foodstuffs on board, there was a ‘postbag’ of about a hundred personal, commercial, and official letters, accounts, petitions, contracts, receipts, and other documents, composed

between 1745 and 1748, in the Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish languages. The British seized the documents as evidence that the *Santa Catharina* was a French vessel and a legitimate prize and they are now housed in the Lansdowne Manuscript Collection of the British Library in London. Written by and to men, women, fathers, sons, wives, mothers, business partners, agents, scholars, teachers, and students, among others, these documents are signs of and also in part constitute the arena of circulation and exchange that comprised Islamicate Eurasia.

Testimony to the trials and tribulations of Darnaden Prouchandy and the many other *renonçants* is found mainly in letters, reports, petitions, specifications, and receipts in the files of the Governor of Cochinchina, which are now stored in the Vietnamese National Archives Centre Number Two in Hồ Chí Minh City. But Cochinchina was only one part of a vast colonial empire in which the *renonçants* lived and moved. Their itineraries and activities also appear in archives and libraries in London, Paris, Aix-en-Provence, Phnom Penh, Hà Nội, and Pondicherry, in documents written in the English, French, Vietnamese, and Tamil languages.

But what is the significance of these peripatetic *petits peuples* and the traces they have left behind? What fruits might be born from the enormous labour of reconstructing their lives and worlds? Why should global historians be concerned with their seemingly trivial tales? Between 1748, when Sayyid Muṣṭafā sent letters to his son, and 1870, when Darnaden Prouchandy arrived in Sài Gòn, European empires had come to dominate much of South and Southeast Asia. The Islamicate Eurasia that Sayyid Muṣṭafā inhabited, as well as its periphery, had been transformed, even subsumed. But it was the circulation and exchange at the heart of Islamicate Eurasia that made the ‘commercialization of politics’ and imperial

conquest possible. As historians such as C. A. Bayly and P. J. Marshall have described, by the middle of the eighteenth century, the Jagat Seths, a family of Hindu bankers in Bengal, had become enormously wealthy and powerful: they controlled the Bengal mint; they made regular payments to the Mughal court; they advanced money to landlords against the harvest; and they had become financiers of and purchasers for the inland trade of the British East India Company. When Siraj ud-Daula became the *nawab* (ruler) of Bengal in 1756, he began to press heavily upon the Jagat Seths for revenue. In response, they directed their considerable resources towards a conspiracy to overthrow the *nawab*, which ended with his ignominious defeat by the British East India Company at the Battle of Plassey in 1757. The subsequent expansion of the Company from its bridgehead in Bengal relied upon the extensive resources of South Asian traders and financiers. Only through understanding Islamicate Eurasia as an ‘arena of circulation and exchange’ is it possible to provide an adequate answer to the question ‘did Europe’s presence in the region from the latter part of the eighteenth century herald continuity, organic change or a fundamental breach with earlier periods?’ (Sood, p. 299). By the latter part of the nineteenth century, that presence was a *fait accompli*.

The peregrinations of Dardenaden Prouchandy and other South Asian *renonçants* reveal that the French colonial empire was a vast interconnected web, like the British empire described by Tony Ballantyne. It had nodes in cities such as Paris, Marseille, Algiers, Dakar, Beirut, Tananarive, Phnom Penh, Sài Gòn, Hà Nội, and Shanghai. Trains, steamships, and later airplanes moved people, merchandise, plants, animals, and contagions between these nodes, linking them together. News and information travelled through submarine

telegraph cables and over telephone lines. The metropole might have dominated the web, but other nodes helped give it shape: by 1920, one prominent journalist from Pondicherry could declare that ‘there is no one at this time who contests the role of Indochina as a “Second Metropole”’. It had become ‘the centre of a new world where [colonial peoples] must henceforth expend their energy and their vitality’ (Pairaudeau, p. 8). The *renonçants* were part of a much broader empire and an imperial story whose chapters others will be moved to write: chapters about those who resisted the conquest of Indochina and whom the French sent to Réunion, the Antilles, Guyana, and New Caledonia; about the Vietnamese Hàm Nghi emperor who went into exile in Algiers in 1888 and the Duy Tân emperor who lived out his life on Réunion from 1916; about the Vietnamese labourers who worked on murderous plantations in New Caledonia in the 1920s; and about the Tirailleurs Sénégalais, soldiers from Senegal who fought for the French against the Vietnamese during the First Indochina War (1947–54). The imperial circuits and linkages would fray and the web would finally unravel with the establishment of new nation-states in the decades after the Second World War.

The cultural and political form of the nation-state continues to dominate the world in which we live. But this was not the world of Sayyid Muṣṭafā, Dardenaden Prouchandy, or their many peers. Attention to their lived realities reminds us that there were once other ways of apprehending the world politically and culturally, and of organizing a life within it. If historians are to document different times, they will need to employ different imaginative geographies: regions of circulation and exchange, far-flung empires, religious ecumenes, ocean basins, and mountain peaks, among others. In doing so, they may better understand the unlikely

emergence of our contemporary geographical imagination. Islamicate Eurasia helped birth an age of European empires from whose tattered webs contemporary nation-states were knit. 'Only connect', E. M. Forster wrote in

the famous apothegm from *Howards End*. Global historians know that in bridging the unconnected arches of past times, we help bridge the vast uncertain expanse between those times and the present.