



Book Review

Dilip M. Menon, Nishat Zaidi, Simi Malhotra, and Saarah Jappie. (2022). *Ocean as Method: Thinking with the Maritime*. London and New York: Routledge. Pp:126+xii. Price: \$39.16. ISBN 9781032246772. Paperback

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Becoming Aware

The *Hind Swaraj* (Indian Home Rule) is a civilizational text (Gandhi 1963). A critique of Western modernity and colonialism, it has been bestowed iconic status in the struggle against the British empire in the 20th century. The book continues to inspire postcolonial scholars. Mahatma Gandhi wrote the book when on board of the *Kildonan Castle* on his return journey from England to South Africa in 1909. The whole manuscript was written on the ship's stationery, and he wrote as "if under inspiration" (Parel 1997: xiv). In his words, "I have written because I could not restrain myself (Gandhi 1963: 6)." When exhausted with writing with his right hand, he switched to his left hand and continued. 40 out of the two 275 pages of the book were written with his left hand. Oblivious to the legibility of his writing (in any case, he never had beautiful handwriting), his thoughts jostled against the limitations of his human body, when pouring out onto the ship's stationary. The ocean beneath gave shape to his words and this oceanic milieu, in the case of the *Hind Swaraj*, became the site for the production of civilizational critique. The realisation of this role, of an oceanic landscape has never become more evident, as when I began reading *Ocean as Method*, the book currently under review.

While reading Nishat Zaidi's fine-grained essay on the late 18th and 19th-century travel accounts of Indian Muslims, I began pondering the exact location of the ship and its watery surface below that gave birth to this seminal text of the *Hind Swaraj* in the 20th century. Following Zaidi, I became aware of "the role of the sea as a historical site (p. 56) Zaidi writes, "these voyagers provide a planetary perspective where narratives are often controlled by the forces of nature and not humans or technologies (p. 68)." Oceanic spaces blessed their surfers with a 'double-vision' that helped travellers to "critiqued London society from their native perspective" on the one hand, and "used European parameters in their radical criticism of their own people and society" on the other (p. 71). Words written on the oceanic waters have left a deep impact. I recall another example from a page of a voyage journal kept by Sir William Jones when aboard the frigate *Crocodile* on his way to India in 1783 (Kejariwal 1988: 29). Here, he noted 16 areas that he intended to study in India that covered vast domains like the laws of Hindus and Mohammedans; arithmetic and geometry and the mixed sciences of the Asiatic people; and information about the trade, manufactures, agriculture, and the commerce of India to name only a few (Kejariwal 1988: 29). Historian, O.P. Kejariwal remarks that "no ordinary mortal would even think of achieving all this in a single lifetime (Kejariwal 1988: 29)."

The oceanic turn in general, and the book *Ocean as Method* in particular, almost whispers to us, the role of oceanic waters and the sea breeze, in the making of this archive. *Hind Swaraj*, the travel writings of Indian Muslims, and a page from the journal of the orientalist Sir William Jones are thus mere examples when *Thinking with the Maritime*. As the book opens itself simultaneously in various directions, a voice yells out: *Heave the lead!* Thomas Roebuck's *laskars* (sailors) coming from Surat, Ghogha, Sind and Kutch reply: *Naki did ho* (Small 1882:

73). Those coming from Bengal, Bombay (now Mumbai) and Kulaba (Colaba in Mumbai) say: *Jahaz salamat proom hazir*. Arabs and *laskars* seen from the perspective of a 'religious turn' sing out: *Sallu 'ala-n-Nabi* (God's blessing be on Prophet). However, the scenario may not always be so serene and for the command of 'heave and rally', the entry in the dictionary returns with the term: *habes mera bap* (or *bhai*) *khali nangar*. Sometimes, the situation warrants aggressive language: *habes sala! bahin chod habes! habes haramzuda* (heave and rally) (Small1882: 73)! What is needed, is an ear to catch all these sounds coming from the oceanic archive. The book under review is an attempt to tune the ear away from a land-centric study of social sciences and tune it towards the complexities and specificities of an ocean-centric range of subjectivities and spatiality. However, the book does not stop by simply rearticulating the importance of placing the sea at the centre. Instead, it pushes readers to think with the maritime and enter into a zone of theory where the ocean acquires agency, a separate subjectivity, and is not just a passive location. Dilip Menon underlines the contemporaneity of this shift by putting it into perspective and highlighting its relevance when he contextualises this intellectual quest for understanding the full implication of globalization.

Walking on Water

Ocean as Method is an outcome of a collaborative research project between two universities (Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi, and the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa, University of Witwatersrand at Johannesburg) that are themselves separated by national borders but connected by the Indian Ocean. At the core of this collaboration, is a tacit understanding that an oceanic perspective is not merely an alternate way of approaching human history. It rather constitutes an urgency in the wake of global warming and climate change. It is a move away from a historiography that is centred on land, states, and empires, and a move to distance itself from an internal logic of unfettered violence, reproduced by historiography. In this endeavour, there is the privileging of a few stated or understated threads that continue throughout the length of the book, binding it together almost as a sort of connecting thread. These constitute a critique of national boundaries, a celebration of cosmopolitanism that is considered to replace the hegemonic analytical frame of the modern and modernity. There is a privileging of the relationalities of the global south, an epistemic framework that gains its strength from harping on the importance of fluidity, or the virtue of remaining in flow. What emerges from this is a world of the oceanic-social where neither the idea of society nor the idea of the sea are at a distance from each other. Instead, both are deeply interconnected at all levels of history, thinking, and materiality. However, as Dilip Menon cautions readers, this is certainly not about thinking that the ocean formulates a continuum of land, or extends outwards from land in a seamless fashion. It is to reckon with their internal contiguities as the sea. To a reader, then, this is about an approach, a perspective, and is not merely a project of recovery of the ocean in history. The book borrows its phrase of *ocean as method* from Renisa Mawani's *Across Oceans of Law* (2018). It depends heavily on the works of Isabel Hofmeyr (See Gupta, Hofmeyr, and Pearson 2010; Hofmeyr 2012, 2019) and on Sanjay Subrahmanyam's *Connected Histories* (1997) approach.

The book is a curious mix of four chapters, each having a different form and texture to it, and yet each connecting well with other in terms of sporting common orientation, and congruity between core concerns (outlined earlier as positing critique against the epistemic hegemony of nation states, emphasising cosmopolitanism, privileging the ocean and oceanic modes of knowing, and acknowledging the agency of the ocean in shaping history writing). Dilip Menon's essay, *Oceanic Histories: From the Terrestrial to the Maritime* (pp. 1-23) insightfully provides a synoptic coverage of the field. He creatively weaves practitioners (here, I mean those working outside the strict disciplinary domains of history like artists and litterateurs) with academic historians and theoreticians who have conceptualised the ocean, provoking us to

shift our perspective to the ocean. Covering a wide canvas of historiographical detail, from installation art to the literary corpus of Amitabh Ghosh, from academic debates on cosmopolitanism to tracing the relations between history and literature, Dilip Menon's essay sets the stage for subsequent chapters, preparing readers for a genealogy of the broad contours of discourse. The essay squarely confronts existing anxieties about how to make sense of the dialectics of boundary-making at the level of nation-states, and the globalisation that it aims to transgress, by negotiating and challenging the restrictions imposed by the former. In such a framing, if he were to proceed with the statement, "the ocean press on our consciousness and lives these days (p. 1)," he wraps up the essay with the call: "we need to start walking on water if we are to truly understand the time and space of globalization (p. 21)." As a reader, I can understand the contemporary need to squarely confront globalisation and nation-states, but I also find this frame to have been over-emphasised. The intellectual resources mobilised in this essay, and the insights emanating from a discussion of various threads allow us to surmise that the dialectic between the global and the national is somewhat worn-out by now, even if it remains an important contemporary issue. As a reader, I may dismissively quip, why do oceans care about this dialectic when they have so many fresh threads to offer? Do we really need to walk on water to address this anxiety that epistemically emanates from land? When the protagonists in Amitabh Ghosh's *Gun Island* walk across the waters from the Sundarbans to Venice, they definitely negotiate national boundaries in an age of globalisation, but are they worried about this dialectic? At the same time, we also need to ask, can a social scientist, a historian, or for that matter, an analyst of the contemporary world afford to ignore the structures that are put in place by the nation-state? One might argue that it is easier for us to dismiss the complex meta-structures of our time, and therefore for a historian, it becomes all the more relevant and challenging to squarely confront and analyse these hegemonic structures and processes.

If Dilip's essay orients us to the oceanic and the various threads of this discourse, four conversations in the next chapter constitute a guide to newly initiated readers on what to read, and of how others before them have navigated this journey of oceans so far. Intended to provide a snapshot of the current state of research in the field, these conversations are an asset to students and researchers planning to enter the domain. As a skilled conversationist, Saarah Jappie has kept her questions simple and open-ended (pp. 24-53). This allows her interviewees, Chandra Frank, Lindsey Stephenson, Charne Lavery, and Caio Simoes De Araujo to respond in equally lucid, extremely informative, and reflective ways about their own intellectual journeys. In a sense, then, these conversations themselves acquire the texture of an archival document on ocean studies from the perspective of practitioners. They reiterate a core and foundational aspect of oceanic studies: its reliance on experiential dynamics. Although, elements and the question of experiential dynamics runs throughout the book, these aspects become most explicit and palpable within Jappie's conversation with Charne Lavery. We find ourselves face to face with oceanic research as "a kind of embodied practice" when Lavery calls for "an attention to the perceptual differences generated by being in or near an oceanic space (p. 37)." It is this difference, which perhaps assigns unique depth to the travel accounts of Indian Muslims that is discussed by Nishat Zaidi in the following chapter.

While travel writings have been studied for quite some time by scholars, specific cases selected by Zaidi take us beyond earlier epistemic categories like pilgrims, Sufis, merchants, and traders, and instead refocus our attention on those Indian Muslims who undertook oceanic voyages in the late 18th century and onward. Unlike imperial / colonial travel writings which privilege differences between the coloniser and the colonised, white and the non-white, European and the rest, Zaidi argues that the accounts selected by her "reveal their mode of negotiating the difference in oceanic spaces (p. 55)." She further claims that "the otherness enacted in these Persian and Urdu travel writings is invested with subjectivity and signification

(ibid.).” This travel writing, according to Zaidi’s analysis, provided its authors with an occasion to critically look back at their own culture and tradition, and critique its subjectivity. But again, the question is, is this not true of the writings of many other Indian intellectuals from this period, from different regions of India, across Maharashtra and Bengal? The ‘double vision’ that Zaidi emphasises resonates strongly in other vernacular writings of the land as well. One may say that the texts, selected and discussed by Zaidi, do share certain contextual similarities with other vernacular writings, and yet, in terms of detail, and their embeddedness in onboard experiences, also distinguishes them from the rest. In their distinctiveness, therefore, they open up new possibilities, and bring to light new textures of life in what can be considered a new thematic archive.

Oceanic space, as discussed in the book, is not devoid of expressing ethical and social concerns either. Therefore, we have a certain privileging of communities and groups that are at the margins on the land. If Zaidi’s essay is about India’s Muslims, Simi Malhotra focuses on Indians in South Africa before the period of Indenture. Taking into consideration the history of migration from the Indian subcontinent to South Africa for the last five to six centuries, she has gleaned or pieced together a synoptic account of this migration in the historiography of the last fifty years. This constitutes a pre-history of Mahatma Gandhi’s arrival to South Africa. Perhaps, she could have extended this exercise to delve further into the issues of subjectivities, the embedded agency of the ocean among Indian communities that arrived in South Africa between the 16th and 19th centuries. The crucial question, then, would be, whether we have such an archive in place that explores these questions. The discourse on indentured labour in India that extends to sugar plantations in Mauritius, Surinam, and Fiji have asked similar questions in quite a creative manner by bringing about conversations between history, literature, and memory.

If the oceanic turn is not merely about mapping the history of communities on the land (whether at the source or at the destination as conventional migration scholars have framed), then what is the nature of this particular archive in South Africa? Does it document the experiences of Indian communities that arrived here in the centuries earlier to Indenture, and how deep does it allow us to delve into their questions of agency, subjectivity, and sensibility caused by the waters of the ocean? Mobilising ideas of three key thinkers from the 20th century, namely Mahatma Gandhi, Romain Rolland, and Sigmund Freud, Simi Malhotra takes an analytical route to this question when engaging with phrases like the ‘Oceanic Circle’, ‘Oceanic feeling’, and the very term ‘Oceanic’ itself (pp. 89-122). Theory itself acquires a prefix from the waters to give shape to the new coinage in this volume: oceanic theory.

Corporeal Ocean

Scholarship on the ocean is not a recent phenomenon in either the social sciences or the humanities—from historians like Ferdinand Braudel (1949 / 1972) to scholars working on Indenture and migration in the Indian Ocean. It has been an important subject for economic historians as well as to literary theorists, and thanks to this, we have a rich corpus of scholarship on the subject today. However, in recent decades, oceans have acquired an enhanced, sharp focus. Due to such interventions, the sea is no longer a passive location, a mere geographic expanse on the analytical map but a historical agent shaping not just geography, climate, and economics, but also the personality of societies and the characteristics of the people in it. This current volume bears witness to a similar analytical turn and offers us an understanding of how certain key issues, and writings about these open-up new possibilities. Oceans are no longer mere carriers, ferrying voiceless slaves and *laskars* across their expanse, speaking in gibberish tongues. The sea is no longer merely painted with ships transporting and circulating commodities and giving birth to empires. The utensils on

board in artist Subodh Gupta's massive boats are no longer empty (see Nair 2022). In addition to the hopes and aspirations of a better future, these utensils are now filled with new ideas, thoughts, theories, and expressive experiences. There is a smell of the sea and salt water in these utensils contained in Subodh Gupta's briefcases. And then, there are the rumours of *Mumiani*, *Mom-i-yai*, and *momyai* too: "someone who drains people of their blood until they die, in order to sell it (Pels 1992: 166)." Intriguingly, in one interpretation, it (*Mumiani* or Bitumen) is made by preserving a human body in a big jar. In another interpretation, it seeps out from a certain rock like resin. Bitumen or *Silajit* in Persian, is a famous aphrodisiac. As if floating on the water's surface, the word is shared between Swahili, Persian, Arabic, and the Indian vernaculars, forming a vast landscape—a metaphor of the oceanic social, and littoral expanse, which is deeply corporeal as well. Ironically, in this zone of culture and memory, it is both an extract from a dead body as also a testosterone-inducing medicine yoked to the service of fertility and desire. The sea is a trickster. An Indian myth on the earth's origin tells us that the sea, when churned, oozed out both poison and the nectar. The oceanic turn like its predecessors (the linguistic turn, pictorial turn, affective turn, among others) has all the potential to yield both good and bad. What matters is how we mobilise various and embedded oceanic experiences, and how skilfully we walk on its waters. This is true for the insights provided in this book, that ask us to deploy the ocean as a method.

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