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HISTORY AND SOCIETY
New Series
23

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Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
2013

Published by

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
Teen Murti House
New Delhi-110011

e-mail : ddnehrumemorial@gmail.com

ISBN : 81-87614-55-2

Price Rs. 100/-; US $ 10

Page setting & Printed by : A.D. Print Studio, 1749 B/6, Govind Puri Extn. Kalkaji, New Delhi - 110019. E-mail : studio.adprint@gmail.com

The Northern Bay of Bengal, 800-1500 C.E.: A history apart?*

Rila Mukherjee**

I

Introducing the Region: The Northern Bay of Bengal as Unit of Study

This essay focuses as much on the waterscape called the Bay of Bengal as on the lands surrounding it, arguing that this waterscape cannot be viewed as a uniform entity. The 'Bay of Bengal' is a British invention; being known earlier as the Arab Sea of *Harkhand*, the European *Gulf* of Bengal[1] and the Chinese Banggela Hai or the *Sea* of Bengal. This waterscape therefore had many names in history and was seen to possess diverse characteristics; being seen successively as gulf, sea and bay.

Rising from the last statement therefore, we cannot speak of a standardized Bay of Bengal and therefore nor can we see it as a uniform world. We need to be aware of, and also underline, the economic and political distinctions between its various sectors, which shaped their nature through the *longue duree*. As an example, peninsular South Asia showed far greater political and commercial dynamism throughout its history than did the

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* Public Lecture delivered at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 23 May 2012.

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[1] Around 1607 the Chinese encyclopedia *Sancai Tuhui* called the Bay '*Banggela hai*'. See Roderich Ptak, 'The Sino-European Map (Shanhai yudi quantu) in the Encyclopedia "Sancai tuhui"', in Angela Schottenhammer and Roderich Ptak (eds.), *The Perception of Maritime Space in Traditional Chinese Sources* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006); series title: East Asian Maritime History 2, pp. 191-207. I am indebted to Roderich Ptak for this reference.

lands surrounding the northern Bay of Bengal. The Chola role in the eleventh century trade was significant and had long-term repercussions in the Bay of Bengal. On the other hand the unit this essay introduces, the northern Bay of Bengal world, showed much less commercial and navigational vigor, particularly from the eighth century and has been little studied in terms of trade flows and networks in the post 800 CE period and until the coming of an Islamic state there in the thirteenth century. The northern Bay of Bengal world, particularly Bengal, only achieved prominence once European merchant companies arrived on its shores. I therefore suggest that we see and understand the northern Bay of Bengal as a regional unit, or perhaps as a sub-unit in the Indian Ocean world and hence the need for this detailed introduction.

This essay is an account, although by no means exhaustive, of routes, networks and flows across and within the northern Bay of Bengal from the early medieval period. The emphasis is on commercial flows; agricultural developments take a back seat in this narrative.

Geographic Focus

'The geographic focus of this essay - that is, the area covered in the northern Bay world - spans the coastlines of four present-day nation-states: India (the western Bengal delta centred on Kolkata), Bangladesh (the southeastern Bengal delta centred on Dhaka), Myanmar (the Arakan coast) and China (Yunnan). Hugging the shores of the Bay of Bengal, with the exception of Yunnan in China, although Yunnan has been seen as part of the Indian world,[2] this unit is as much a territorial world as it is a maritime world.

[2] Bin Yang, 'The Rise and Fall of Cowry Shells: The Asian Story', *Journal of World History*, vol.22/no.1 (March 2011), pp. 1-26; Bin Yang, *Between Winds and Clouds: The Making of Yunnan, Second Century B.C.E.- Twentieth Century C.E.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Bin Yang, 'Horses, Silver, and Cowries: Yunnan in Global Perspective', *Journal of World History*, vol.15/no.3 (September 2004), pp. 281-322.

Within India this essay concentrates on the north Orissa coast and the western Bengal delta. The southern Orissa coast historically showed more synergy with the Andhra coast and is included within the term 'Coromandel'. The Coromandel Coast, derived from the Tamil Cholamandalam, known to the Chinese as the Chulien coast, is part of the southern Bay of Bengal world, which, from the time of the Cholas and then the Pandyans, exhibited considerable vitality, demonstrating enduring contacts with the Southeast Asian and Chinese worlds.[3]

The essay therefore concentrates on the northern part of the shores of the Bay of Bengal, with Yunnan, Assam, Burma and the Bengal, Arakan and north Pegu coasts as the main nucleus. The ebb and flow of peoples, cultures, commodities, routes and networks in the Bay demonstrates how an economy structured a region for over a thousand years. The focus is therefore trans-boundary and in the present context, transnational.

Finally, I admit that there is a substantial difference between a unit and a sub-unit, and this distinction will be elaborated upon later.

A Region Outside National and Cartographic Frames

The northern Bay of Bengal is a marginal zone in historical studies; this is also echoed in geographical studies and the neglect of its discrete sectors resonates in academic studies of states along the Bay of Bengal in general.[4] I found it almost impossible to find the western and southeastern Bengal deltas, as also Burma,

[3] Among recent publications see Hermann Kulke, K. Kesavapany and Vijay Sakhuja (eds.), *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2009); Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani and Geoff Wade (eds.), *Early Interactions Between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange* (Singapore/India: ISEAS/Manohar, 2011).

[4] David Vumlallian Zou and M. Satish Kumar, 'Mapping A Colonial Borderland: Objectifying the Geo-Body of India's Northeast', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol.70/no.1 (February) 2011, pp. 141-170.

on the same map, the region usually ending up as an inset on a map of South Asia, possibly because the region spans the three nation-states of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Van Schendel writes that because the region falls outside conventional area classification this neglect is in turn echoed in maps: 'anyone interested in finding fairly detailed modern maps showing the region covering Burma, Northeast India, Bangladesh, and neighbouring parts of China knows that these do not exist. This is a region that is always a victim of cartographic surgery'.[5]

How is this surgery evident? Van Schendel writes:

> Over the past half-century, the scramble for the area has influenced mapmakers as much as the rest of us, and atlases commonly have maps with the captions 'Southeast Asia' and 'South Asia'. These apparently objective visualisations present regional heartlands as well as peripheries of parts of the world that always drop off the map, disappear into the folds of two-page spreads, or end up as insets. In this way, cartographic convenience reinforces a hierarchical spatial awareness, highlighting certain areas of the globe and pushing others into the shadows.[6]

Anyone who has studied maps of countries along the northern Bay of Bengal knows how true this is. Van Schendel notes that although in terms of physical space criterion this area shares language affinities (for example, Tibeto-Burman languages), religious commonalities (for example, community religions and, among the universalistic religions, Buddhism and Christianity), cultural traits (for example, kinship systems, ethnic scatter zones), ancient trade networks, and ecological conditions (for example, mountain agriculture),[7] it is now relegated to the margins of ten valley-dominated states with which it has

[5] Willem van Schendel, 'Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: Jumping scale in Southeast Asia', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 20/no. 6 (2002), pp. 647–68, p. 652.
[6] Ibid., pp. 651-2.
[7] Ibid., pp. 653-4.

antagonistic relationships - China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal.[8] It is also important to keep in mind that as the total number of states in the Bay of Bengal world declined so did older networks, reinforcing the status of many of these lands as 'zomian'. Giersch estimated that by the early nineteenth century the total number of states in mainland Southeast Asia was reduced from twenty-two to just three: Burma, Siam and Vietnam.[9]

But my essay has another vision. While these countries literally fall off the map, due to the frontierisation of nation-states, we may see them also as a crossroads in a historically multi-cultural world and a highly variegated one at that.[10]

II

Identifying the Landscape

The Extreme Eastern Part of South Asia on Land and Sea Extreme eastern South Asia, that is Bengal and the lands to its northeast fanning into Burma and China, or present India's northeast and beyond, is the focus here. This vast space includes diverse topographic features: plains, forests, estuaries, deltas, rivers, mountains, lakes, plateaus and remote passes, and to attempt a history of this space is challenging. There are not one, but two deltas here: the western delta, corresponding to present West Bengal in India and centred now on Kolkata, and the south-eastern delta, in present Bangladesh, centred on Dhaka. Not just vis-a-vis location, but on a historical axis too, the two deltas are different as they followed disparate trajectories, dictated in part by their geographies. By the fourteenth century the two deltas

[8] Ibid., p. 654, fn.15.

[9] C. Patterson Giersch, *Asian Borderlands: The Transformation of Qing China's Yunnan Frontier* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 213.

[10] See Yasmin Saikia, 'Religion, Nostalgia, and Memory: Making an Ancient and Recent Tai-Ahom Identity in Assam and Thailand', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol.65/no.1 (2006), pp. 33-60.

were named after political units: 'Lakhnawati' in the case of the western delta and 'Bangalah' in the case of the southeastern delta. By the seventeenth century they came to be known, according to Edward Terry, as Patan and Purb (east), with the 'river', presumably the Ganga, as dividing line.[11] This echoed the old Ptolemaic division of India Intra Gangem and India Extra Gangem that is, India Within the Ganges and India Beyond the Ganges. Therefore the term 'Bengal delta' is misleading for although there is, geologically, only the one delta, the two parts showed very divergent traits in their histories. Thus, the term that I use here, the 'Bengal deltas', is more suitable.

This essay will focus on waterscapes and discuss a set of threefold flows: those from the Bay of Bengal into the littoral, those from the interior into the Bay of Bengal via the littoral as also with those across the Bay of Bengal touching other littorals. While the coast has been privileged here, the essay covers land and sea and moves between the western delta of Bengal, with its successive ports at Tamralipta, Saptagrama and Sagor, and the southeastern Bengal delta, with its chief port at Chattagrama, anglicized as Chittagong. Other ports in the southeastern delta include an unnamed port used by the Kushanas,[12] the as yet

[11] Edward Terry, *A Voyage to East-India &c* (edn. rpt.; London: J. Wilkie, 1655), p. 84.

[12] Rhodes: 'The fact that few, if any, of the Kushana copies are found in West Bengal, suggest that the port of Chandraketugarh, on the west side of the estuary, was not a major beneficiary of this gold trade, and it seems that a riverine port on the eastern side of Bengal, closer to Dhaka or Comilla is more likely to have gained'. See Nicholas G. Rhodes, 'Trade in South-East Bengal in the First Millennium C.E.: The Numismatic Evidence', in Rila Mukherjee (ed.), *Pelagic Passageways: The Northern Bay of Bengal before Colonialism* (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2011), pp. 263-75, p. 264; Deyell: 'Kushana and Gupta *dinaras*, and local imitations of both, were in circulation at various times. They are found in the northwest and southeast (Bengal), and not much in-between'. See John Deyell, 'Monetary and Financial Webs: The Regional and International Influence of pre-modern Bengali Coinage', in Rila Mukherjee (ed.), *Pelagic Passageways: The Northern Bay of Bengal before Colonialism* (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2011), pp. 279-314, p. 281.

unidentified port of Samandar,[13] and the smaller deltaic ports of Bakla, Sripur, Loricul, Katrabuh and Sandwip. Some of these ports were initially situated on islands that grew from *chars* or sandbanks, and the island as contact zone assumes great importance in this amphibian visualization although, as the southeastern delta progressively consolidated itself in the eighteenth century, these islands gradually became part of the mainland.[14]

But economic and cultural flows to the coast also came from uplands, and nowhere were the uplands more significant than around the northern Bay of Bengal. All through history, until the colonial intrusion into the Bay in the late eighteenth century, the northern Bay lands were noteworthy for Bengal's economic growth: precious stones including jade and rubies came from northern Burma, the Shan states and Yunnan, and silver, gold and other metals arrived from this area through the uplands and river routes. The Yunnan-Shan corridor supplied Bengal with most of its metal needs throughout its history. Yunnan was the pivot around which both the Bengali and Chinese economy revolved during the ancient and medieval periods.

Moving further southeast, any discussion of the southeastern Bengal delta automatically includes a discussion of the Arakan coast, which was indistinguishable, physically and culturally, from the southeastern Bengal coast.[15] This spatial conception eschews

[13] Rila Mukherjee, 'An Elusive Port in Early Medieval Bengal: The Mystery of Samandar' in S. Jeyaseela Stephen (ed.), *The Indian Trade at the Asian Frontier* (New Delhi: Gyan Books, 2008), pp. 51- 68.

[14] See for the importance of islands, Paul D'Arcy, *The People of the Sea: Environment, Identity, and History in Oceania* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), and more recently, Paul D'Arcy, 'Sea Worlds: Pacific and South-East Asian History Centred on the Philippines', in Rila Mukherjee (ed.), *Oceans Connect: Reflections on Waterworlds Across Time and Space* (New Delhi: Primus, 2013), pp. 23-38. The Nicobars is one such case that awaits a systematic study.

[15] It is generally accepted that Sriksetra and Bagan did not initiate commercial contact with the neighbouring coast. Rather they continued

the rigid separation between South and Southeast Asian historiography; this area being a coherent economic and cultural unit sharing many common traits.[16] The area was also an environmental continuum because, as Van Galen notes, both the Arakan and southeastern Bengal coasts have a climate and geography fundamentally different from the Ganga and the Aerawaddy plains. Although overland travel in the Arakan-Bengal continuum was made difficult historically by steep and rugged mountain chains, mainly the Arakan Yoma, the numerous intersecting rivers and the shallow coastal waters provided an excellent infrastructure for trade and communication. Additionally, the Arakan and southeastern Bengal littorals both share a very high level of rainfall (reaching on average 500 cm. per year), which forms a sharp contrast with the much drier plains of the Ganges and the Aerawaddy. The heavy rainfall and the fertile river valleys also supported higher population densities and produced a remarkable agricultural surplus in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This eco-system and sub-region thus forms a homogenous area entwined within the trading networks of the Bay of Bengal in history.[17]

The entire Burma region: comprising the Pyu centres, Arakan, Bagan/Ava and Pegu were old trading partners of Bengal.

an existing commercial network, which they augmented with their greater resource bases. See Janice Stargardt, 'Burma's Economic and Diplomatic Relations with India and China from Early Medieval Sources', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient,* vol.14/no.1 (April 1971), pp. 38-62, see particularly pp. 41, 54-5. A later travelogue emphasizes the fuzziness between the southeastern and Arakan coasts: see Glanius, *A Relation of an Unfortunate Voyage to the Kingdom of Bengala* (London: Henry Bonwick, 1682).

[16] See the focus of Jos Gommans and Jacques P. Leider (eds.), *The Maritime Frontier of Burma: Exploring Political, Cultural and Commercial Interaction in the Indian Ocean World, 1200-1800* (Amsterdam: KITLV Press, 2002).

[17] Stephen Egbert Arie Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal: The rise and decline of the Mrauk U kingdom (Burma) from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century' Ph.D. thesis, (CNWS, Faculty of Arts, Leiden University, 2008), chap. 1, pp. 15-16. Available at https://openacess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/12637, accessed 8 July 2010.

This trading partnership was marked by various geographic and environmental networks: one comprising the sea routes to Sriksetra, Arakan and Pegu, the other comprising of a combination of land and river routes that ran from the south-eastern Bengal delta, through what are now India's North-Eastern states, into northern Burma - to Bagan, Ava and Ameerapura, successive capitals, then into the Wa area and the Shan states, and through the Southeast Asian Massif into Yunnan. The river valleys between the Salween and the Sittaung in the southeast brought into Bengal, through riverine and coastal routes, teak and other timber for house and boat building. Land routes brought in precious stones and metals. Tagaung, crucial to Burmese rulers from Pyu times, linked, via Mogok, the Shweli, Taping (Tabein), Muse and Bhamo to Yunnan and afforded access to the silver mines of Bawdwin and Yadanatheingyi. This silver too found its way into Bengal. This region was also marked by a fairly uniform monetary zone and witnessed the use of metals as currency from very early times.[18]

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[18] Elizabeth Moore and U Win Maung (Tampawaddy), 'Change In The Landscape Of First Millennium A.D. Myanmar', *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research*, vol.4/no.2, (Autumn 2006), pp. 2-26, see p. 10:

> Among the artefacts [in the Samon valley in Burma] were a number not recorded before, such as kye doke or bronze packets, a variety of bronze axes and vessels, and a range of bronze ornaments thought to have been used on coffins, including 'mother-goddess' figures and floral ornaments. The high-copper, and in some instances with a measurable silver content, of the few bronzes that have been analyzed indicates a range of trade contacts oriented towards the mineral resources of the north and northeast along the edge of the Shan Plateau.

See also pp. 11-12, 17 of the same article; Elizabeth Moore, 'Interpreting Pyu material culture: Royal chronologies and finger-marked bricks', *Myanmar Historical Research Journal,* no. 13 (June 2004), pp. 1-57; Michael A. Aung-Thwin,'Origins and Development of the Field of Prehistory in Burma', *Asian Perspectives*, vol.40/no.1 (2002), pp. 6-34, see pp. 27-30; Bob Hudson, 'A Pyu Homeland in the Samon Valley: A new theory of the origins of Myanmar's early urban system', *Myanmar Historical Commission Conference Proceedings*, pt. 2 (2005), pp. 59-79.

Further to the east the maritime routes brought into Bengal tin from the Malay Peninsula. The Malay Peninsula was also famous for its gold deposits and both tin and gold were extensively traded in along the Bay. From around the fifth century CE tin was much in demand in Bengal, particularly to be used in alloys such as bronze for religious and ornamental sculptures. *Kauri* shells from the eastern Malay coast were also an important product and export item.

The Maldives Islands had robust connections with the northern Bay and finds frequent mention in this essay. The Maldives, although situated in the Arabian Sea and not in the Bay of Bengal, had, nevertheless, a millennia old connection, through the *kauri* networks, with the Orissa and Bengal coasts and also with Yunnan via Bengal. Sri Lanka comes into our canvas with the expansion of Buddhist networks across the Bay, as also as termination point of the coastal route from Bengal, as confirmed in the medieval *Mangal Kavya* from Bengal.

This (re)visioning of the extent of the Bay of Bengal resonated also in the Chola offensives against Srivijaya in 1025 CE. The Chola raids went beyond the confines of the Bay of Bengal and attempted to create a dynamic space for Chola commerce on the eastern side of the Malay and Indonesian coasts. The Chola vision therefore comprised the waters of the Bay of Bengal and beyond. I too have taken the liberty of visioning a greater Bay of Bengal in terms of cultural networks and regional trading patterns, as also in terms of the presence or absence of commercial and cultural centres over time.

III
Regional and Sub-Regional Units

Bengal

Our study therefore deals with a regional unit. But there also emerge certain problems in such an approach, particularly as regards sub regional units. Within Bengal, in the period under

review, there existed various geographic units: primarily, Vanga, Varendra, Samatata and Harikela, and secondarily, Suhma, Rarh and Pundravardhana—smaller units that lay *within and across* these sub units. There has not been, to date, a consensus as to where one ended and the other began.

Also these were not just geographic units but also dynamic cultural and economic units, experiencing change with time. For example, Vanga and Samatata acquired various, as also sometimes similar, spatial identities at numerous times in history. Harikela became an expanding unit from the eighth century, suggesting that diverse economic and commercial factors were making their mark in the area.[19]

Other than these classical units, there were other units to be discerned here. One, already mentioned, was the ecological unit containing the two deltas: the western and southeastern Bengal deltas. In addition we can discern an inner frontier centering on the southeastern Bengal delta called *bhati* that provided cultural and economic stability for Bengal and Arakan and, again, another inner frontier, the mountain zone, in the Shan area for Burma and Yunnan. The outer frontiers are the littoral and the 'northeast' and the latter refers to the area between India and China, comprising the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh in the Union of India. Land and river routes in this area linked up with Tibet, through Tibet into Central Asia, and via upper Burma into China. Rivers played a crucial role in this regional economy.

A Maritime Sub-Unit

Wang Gungwu draws our attention to a new maritime sub-unit that emerged c. tenth century. The Nanhai or Southern trade of China, which we will read about later, became a semiterranean

[19] Rila Mukherjee, (forthcoming), 'From Region to Locale and From Space to Place: Locating Srihatta/Sylhet in the Medieval Bay of Bengal World', in Ana Crespo Solana (ed.), *Spatio-Temporal Narratives: GIS and the Study of Trading Networks (1500-1800)* (Newcastle, UK).

trade from the time of the T'ang decline in 906 CE. This semiterraneanism was visible in two sectors: the South China and Java seas[20] and the latter linked up with the Bay of Bengal trade.

More Sub-Regional Units

In this essay, 'Burma' has been used to designate the country now known as Myanmar. This geographic unit contained, in the period under review here, various small coastal and inland states: the Pyu, Arakan, Bagan, Ava and later Burma (Bramah, Brema), the Toungoo and the Konbaung states. It is important to keep in mind that these terms occurred in specific historical, and usually political, contexts.

The question arises: do we see this particular unit as a sub-regional unit in terms of its interactions with the eastern coast of South Asia or as a larger regional unit showing dynamism from very early times, as Wade points out?[21] Our perceptions will depend largely on the networks that are visible within this unit *over time*, and I think that once we direct our gaze away from Bengal and toward southwest China, we may find that Burma is not a sub-unit in the Bay of Bengal at all, but a regional unit in its own right.

As in Bengal, here too we find political and economic tensions between the interior and the coast. Therefore it may not be correct to study this space solely in terms of coastal polities such as Arakan and Pegu. Bagan and Ava were equally important and the history of this space shows that major central places and capital towns here, Beikthano/Halin, Bagan and later Ava and Ameerapura, situated themselves close to the sources of silver:

[20] Wang Gungwu, 'A Two-Ocean Mediterranean', in Geoff Wade and Li Tana (eds.), *Anthony Reid and the Study of the Southeast Asian Past* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012), pp. 69-84, p. 73.

[21] Geoff Wade, 'An Early Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia, 900–1300 C.E.', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol.40/no.2 (June 2009), pp. 221–65; Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen (eds.), *Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century: The China Factor* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010).

the Bawdin and Yadanatheingyi mines at Namtu in and around Mogokin in the cases of Beikthano/Halin, Bagan and Ava, as also the ruby mines at Mohnyin, and the Maolong, Mangleng, Munai and Ox Ag silver mines in the Wa area in the case of the later Ameerapura. These mines straddled the routes between Burma and China, in the area of the Wa and Shan states, and were responsible for the legendary wealth of Burma.

The Shan plateau, today part of Myanmar, but until the nineteenth century housing a cluster of independent states, enters our story for the Panlaung and Zawgyi, rivers flowing down from the Shan foothills, connect with the Myit Nge or Dotawaddy which comes down from the Yunnan border at Muse to enter the Aerawaddy east of Mandalay. This fluvial network saw the earliest settlements and connected them to the Shan hills and Yunnan, regions extremely crucial to Burma's evolution.

The China that directly comes into our region is its present southwestern part, the regional unit of Yunnan, which contained within it, in the time surveyed here, the kingdoms of Nan Zhao and Dali. These names too are context and time specific. This area connected to the southeastern Bengal delta through northern Burma. Religious themes and art forms, primarily Vajrayana Buddhism, traveled from this region to Yunnan and found expression there in the arts, scrolls and seals.[22] More important, Chinese texts for our area are prolific and will be much referred to here, although I must also admit that these sources are much less obtainable than those for the Ma'abar coast and also more fragmentary.[23]

The fourteenth century Ma'abar coast that Yuan China interacted with was part of the older Chola coast, which had

[22] Alexander C. Soper; Helen B. Chapin, 'A Long Roll of Buddhist Images', I-IV, *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 32/nos. 1-2/3, 4 (1970), pp. 5-41, pp. 157-199, 259-89+291-306, vol.33/no.1/2 (1971) pp. 75-140.

[23] See for example, Geoff Wade, 'An Annotated Translation of the Yuan Shi Account of Mian (Burma)' in Perry Link (ed.) *The Scholar's Mind: Essays in Honor of Frederick W. Mote* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2009), pp. 17-50.

stretched from the southern Orissan coast to the tip of the peninsula. This term - the 'Ma'abar coast' - gained currency in the post-Chola period. This eventually became known as the Coromandel Coast in the seventeenth century, derived by way of the earlier 'Choladesam' and 'Cholamandalam'. Chau Ju Kua's text tells us that earlier this coast was called Chu-li-ye or Chu-lien coast, i.e. the Chola coast,[24] also known in the Song period as Zhu-nian.[25]

The Ma'abar coast linked Bengal with the southern Bay and granted it access to Sri Lanka, an emporium in the trade between the eastern and western Indian oceans for a long time. Sri Lanka held a special, and central, place within Chinese perceptions of trade in the Indian Ocean, just as it did for seafaring countries to the west. The Chinese called the sea around Sri Lanka, comprising both the southern Bay and the northern Indian Ocean, the Sea of Si-lan.[26]

The modern name Sri Lanka has been used throughout rather than the colonial appellation 'Ceylon', derived from the Portuguese 'Ceilao', or the earlier name 'Saylam' as did Fra Mauro in his *World Map* of 1459,[27] or even the 'S-ilan' of the Chinese,[28] or the name 'Taprobana', derived from the Greek, as

[24] *Chau ju-kua: his work on the Chinese and Arab trade in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries: entitled Chu-fan-chi*, translated from the Chinese and annotated by Friedrich Hirth and W. W. Rockhill (St. Petersburg: 1911); (rpt; Taipei: Literature House, 1965), p. 93 and notes p. 98.

[25] Noboru Karashima and Tansen Sen, 'Appendix II, Chinese Texts Describing or Referring to the Chola Kingdom as Zhu-nian', in Hermann Kulke et al. (eds.), *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa*, pp. 292-315.

[26] *Chau ju-kua*, p. 26.

[27] The date is disputed. See Piero Falchetta, *Fra Mauro's World Map*, Terrarum Orbis 5 (Venice: BREPOLS, 2006), pp. 58-9.

[28] The Chinese called the sea around Sri Lanka, comprising both the southern Bay of Bengal and the northern Indian Ocean, the Sea of Si-lan. See *Chau ju-kua*, p. 26. This would be again termed the Sea of Ceylon, or the central Indian Ocean by Flores (2004). See later on in this essay.

did Gerard Mercator;[29] although we could well have used the Arab name of Sarandib, from which we have the word 'serendipity', or even the much older Indic name of Singhaladwipa in this essay.

Just as Sri Lankan shipping linked the western and eastern Indian oceans, so did shipping on the Malabar Coast. Chou-ku-fei underlines the importance of the Malabar Coast by noting that until the twelfth century traders were unable to sail directly to Arabia and vice versa; instead they embarked at Quilon on small but fast boats to Arabia.[30]

What is important to note is that these different names were not randomly assigned. They show the numerous and assorted networks visible over time, and also indicate the region's location as well as its political position in space. Finally, the names also demonstrate the region's relative strength in the economic and commercial system in the period under review.

IV
Cycles, Units and Sub-Systems in the Late Ancient and Early Medieval Bay of Bengal World

Let me start with Bengal. Around 650 CE, the growth of the western Bengal delta started slowing down. In Bengal, Sasanka died *c*. 625 and thereafter Harshavardhana from the west and Bhaskaravarman from the east controlled respectively the western and eastern deltas. From this time we notice a proliferation of small states in the southeastern delta, possibly because no one single power emerged in the delta. Rhodes noted that the T'ang-Sassanid silk (also coral and aloes) network that passed through Bengal faced a crisis at this time with the near simultaneous deaths of three powerful monarchs controlling the central portion

[29] Taprobana was frequently confused with Sumatra. Martin Behaim's 1492 globe marks Sri Lanka as Taprobana while Sumatra is named Seilan Insula or the Island of Ceylon. The confusion probably started from the 1447 text of Conti/Bracciolini, which called 'Sciamutera' or Sumatra 'Taprobanes'. See Falchetta, *Fra Mauro's World Map*, p. 75.
[30] In *Chau ju-kua*, pp. 15, 24.

of this route: Songsten Gampo of Tibet, Bhaskaravarman of Kamarupa and Harsavardhana of north India all passing away *c*. 650 CE. Political uncertainties now influenced the overland routes at the South Asian end. And once the Sassanids fell in the second quarter of the seventh century the other side of this route was assumed by many historians to be closed.[31] The possible reorientations in routes may have impacted on ports in the western Bengal delta. Tamralipta, the great port in the western Bengal delta, seems to have been in decline already from the seventh century; there being no recorded sailings from that port after that time.[32]

However, Sun Laichen tells us of two T'ang notices on the overland route from China to India (this must mean Bengal) via northern Burma in 691 CE, one dated 807 or 810 CE, another one of 863, and a third of 1060.[33] The Fatimid map of c. late eleventh century showed a route from China running through northern India (Kanauj was mentioned) and a seventeenth century map of China and South Asia, shown here as Map 1, depicted another route branching off in north Burma to come down the Bengal coast and then move further down the Coromandel Coast.[34]

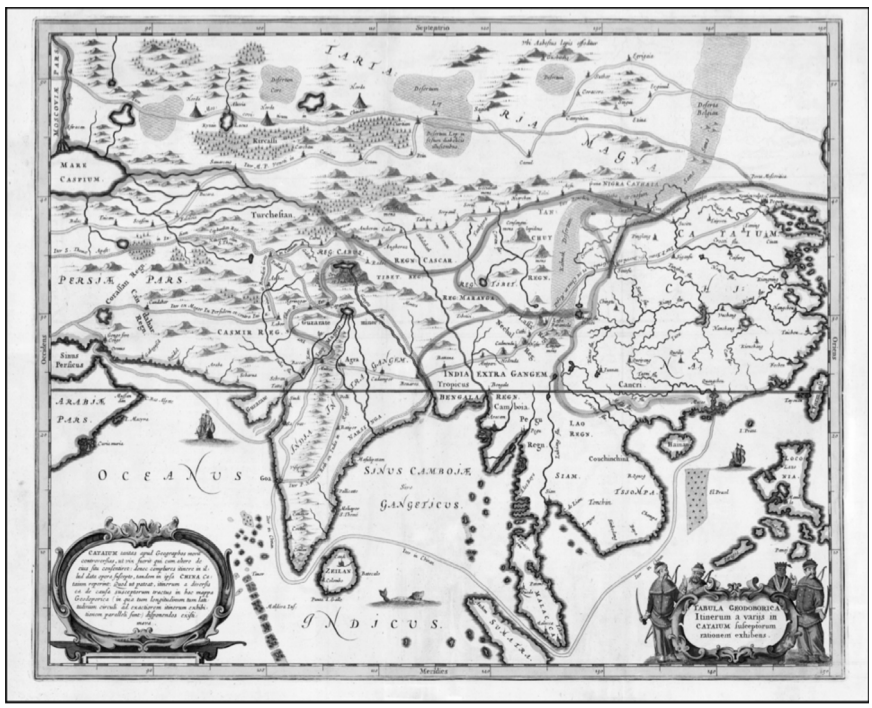
Therefore, the routes were obviously still in use and remained so at least until the twelfth century. It is during this time, that is

[31] Nicholas G. Rhodes, Trade in South-East Bengal in the First Millennium C.E..' in Rila Mukherjee (ed.), *Pelagic Passageways*, p. 266.

[32] Rila Mukherjee, 'Introduction', in Rila Mukherjee (ed.), *Pelagic Passageways,* pp. 1-260, see p. 32.

[33] Sun Laichen, 'Chinese Historical Sources on Burma', *Journal of Burma Studies*, vol. 2 (Special Issue, 1997), pp. 1-53, see pp. 13, 15-16.

[34] Yossef Rapoport and Emilie Savage-Smith, 'Medieval Islamic View of the Cosmos: The Newly Discovered Book of Curiosities', *The Cartographic Journal*, vol. 41/no. 3 (December 2004), pp. 253–259, see p. 259. See too, Jeremy Johns and Emilie Savage-Smith, 'The Book of Curiosities: A Newly Discovered Series of Islamic Maps', *Imago Mundi*, 55/1 (2003), pp. 7 – 24, p. 11. The Coromandel portion of this road is shown clearly in Kircher's map, here as Map 1, in light green.



Map 1: Athanasius Kircher, 1667: *Tabula Geodorica Itinerum a varijs in Cataium*, or *Roads to China*, taken from his encyclopedia on China, *China Illustrata*

the Pala period in Bengal, that art forms and scripts, possibly from eastern South Asia, influenced Dali Yunnan, implying that the eastern India - Bagan - Yunnan route was functioning in the post Nan Zhao period, and into the Song period in China.[35] Yunnan was also importing Maldivian *kauris* from Bengal.[36] At this time, Tagaung's strategic position on the Yunnan - Bagan frontier is evident in the array of Tagaung artifacts attributed to Anirruddha as part of his east flank fortification,[37] and soon after we have records of Bagan-Song contacts, building upon previous T'ang-

[35] Alexander C. Soper; Helen B. Chapin, 'A Long Roll of Buddhist Images', I-IV, *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 32/nos. 1-2/3, 4 (1970), pp. 5-41, pp. 157-199, 259-89+291-306, vol. 33/no. 1/2 (1971) pp. 75-140.

[36] Bin Yang, 'Horses, Silver, and Cowries..'.

[37] Association of Myanmar Archaeologists in http://aomar.wordpress.com/, accessed January 24, 2012.

Burma-India links.[38] So, it is unlikely that routes were in complete and total disarray. However we cannot say with any certainty how usable this route, and its variations, was as China's northern borders were menaced in the eleventh-twelfth centuries and opened only with the Mongol takeover of China in the middle of the thirteenth century.

So we may surmise that the political confusion in eastern Central Asia and China was echoed in declining circulation of coins in the western Bengal delta. Although the Pyu appeared around 638 CE with the foundation of Sriksetra, this empire became a significant source of silver for Bengal only much later, remaining an important sourcing area until its decline c. 832 CE. The same may be said for the Nan Zhao state in Yunnan, which appeared in 729 CE. It was only at its demise c. 902 that the region of Yunnan became a significant transmitter of silver through Burma into Bengal.[39] However Bagan, which emerged in 849 CE, diverted initially much of the silver away from the northern Bay of Bengal kingdoms. In 937 the Dali kingdom emerged in Yunnan, this was conquered by the Mongols in 1253 and then used as a springboard to conquer China. The Dali kingdom theoretically remained as a source of silver for the southeastern Bengal delta, as had Nan Zhao before it, but as we shall now see, silver supplies into the southeastern Bengal delta fell off inexplicably, going by a decline in coin circulation, between the tenth and the thirteenth centuries.[40] Let us see this period in more detail.

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[38] Sun Laichen, 'Chinese Historical Sources on Burma', pp. 13, 15, 17-8.

[39] Bagan reputedly carried out an expedition against Nan Zhao to reopen the routes to China, when is not known. See Janice Stargardt, 'Burma's Economic and Diplomatic Relations', pp. 38-62, see pp. 51-3.

[40] Rila Mukherjee, 'Silver Links! Bagan-Bengal and the Metal Corridors into Bengal: 9th to 13th Centuries', paper presented at the international meeting 'Early Myanmar and Its Global Connections', organized by the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre, Singapore and Ministry of Culture, Myanmar, at Bagan, February 2012.

Into the 800s

Rhodes wrote that fifth-sixth century Samatata in Bengal seemed to have had more access to gold, and was hence more active in long distance trade. The trade route along which this gold arrived in Samatata is uncertain, and may either have been from Assam or from Tibet, via Assam or via Nepal. Certainly, by this time, the kingdom of Kamarupa, centred near the modern city of Guwahati in the Brahmaputra Valley, was growing in wealth and importance under the Varman dynasty. Also the Lichhavi kingdom of Nepal, based in the Kathmandu Valley, enjoyed a remarkable period of prosperity during the seventh century, no doubt financed by transit trade, the silk trade between T'ang China and Sassanid Persia. The silk may have been imported from China via the sea route, up the Bay of Bengal to Samatata, and thence through Pataliputra in the kingdom of Harshavardhana, through Nepal and Tibet and further on to Bukhara and beyond to the Sassanian Empire of Iran. Exactly when the silk route via the Bay of Bengal commenced is difficult to prove through numismatic evidence alone, but the trade was probably flourishing during at least part of the sixth and seventh centuries, and perhaps earlier. Such a valuable trade would explain the wealth of gold currency in Samatata, as it would have helped finance the great monastic complex of Mainamati. It could also have financed the flowering of stone sculpture in Nepal, as well as the power of the Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo (*c*. 629-49 CE). It is difficult to imagine a trade item other than silk that could have generated vast quantities of wealth in such a short time, but undoubtedly such trade would have depended on political stability, as created by Harshavardhana in northern India.[41]

However, from the seventh century the many kingdoms of Samatata struck debased gold coins. During the years around 700 CE it seems that the two currency zones, gold in Samatata and silver in Harikela, were still differentiated, but at some time

[41] Nicholas G. Rhodes, 'Trade in South-East Bengal in the First Millennium C.E..' in Rila Mukherjee (ed.), *Pelagic Passageways*, pp. 265-6.

during the eighth century, the gold coinage in Samatata ceased to circulate and the Harikela silver coinage took over in Samatata territory. It seems that the rise in the power and prosperity of Harikela took place at the expense of the kingdom of Samatata, and the trading hub of the region shifted southeastwards. This brings us to the ninth century.

From 800 to 1000

Although we notice a shrinkage in trade and the circulation of coinage after the eighth century in Bengal, paradoxically new maritime contacts to the East were in evidence during the ninth-tenth centuries, suggesting that older trading partners and routes may have been in crisis and an active quest to locate new partners was in place. The decline of the Southern or Nanhai trade from China may have been a factor for this significant commercial and diplomatic shift. The Nanhai trade had been in evidence from the beginnings of the first millenium, with a significant take-off around 200 CE.

However between 589 and 618 CE China deliberately neglected the Nanhai trade as the Sui dynasty sought to curb the growing wealth and assertiveness of southern China. This policy also discouraged many foreign traders from trading with China.[42] It is important to note that the anti maritime policy of the Sui emerged just before a perceptible decline of trading, financial and shipping activities within Bengal and the northern Bay of Bengal lands, although we have yet to examine the links between the Nanhai trade and the northern Bay of Bengal more extensively. We have already mentioned that there was less coinage in circulation in Bengal from this time, perhaps testifying to a slow down in the economy. And the slow-down assumed crisis proportions by the tenth century, visible in terms of a paucity of metallic sources throughout the northern Bay of Bengal.

[42] Wang Gungwu, *The Nanhai Trade*: *The Early History of Chinese Trade in the South China Sea* (rpt; Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998), p. 59 and endnote 2 on p. 65. In 598 Wen-ti issued an edict banning the building of ships over 30 Chinese feet in length.

As the Nanhai trade declined the ports of Southeast Asia assumed significance, as direct trade with China was not encouraged. This move obviously privileged the southern Bay of Bengal. As example, we can cite the case of Srivijaya, which rose in AD 682. By 906 when the Tang dynasty ended, the Nanhai trade was 'reduced to a trickle',[43] and the ports controlled by Srivijaya had become very important in connecting the southern Bay of Bengal to the China seas.

Srivijaya also attempted to break into the feeder lines of trade between the north and south Bay, which would give it a greater control in trade flows over the *whole* of the Bay of Bengal. In the first half of the ninth century Srivijaya sent a mission to Pala Bengal to expand its maritime network.[44] In 860 CE the Srivijayan monarch Balaputradeva financed the construction of Buddhist monasteries in eastern India.[45]

Another example. Despite lessening trade and currency circulation along the Bay overland - in Van Schendel's words, zomian - areas also seem to have entered, through the river-valleys, the world of the northern Bay of Bengal. Hall has emphasized the significance of upstream-downstream interactions in Southeast Asia,[46] and we see that the same is equally applicable for Bengal. The Paschimbhag plaque of the Chandras at Srihatta, dating from the tenth century, emphasized the importance of the Meghna fluvial network, and more important, indicated that Srichandra and his father had invaded countries up to the

[43] Wang Gungwu, *The Nanhai Trade*, p. 79.
[44] Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600-1400*, Asian Interactions and Comparisons. (Published with the Association for Asian Studies: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), p. 214.
[45] Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, p. 220.
[46] K. R. Hall, 'Unification of the Upstream and Downstream in Southeast Asia's First Islamic Polity: The Changing Sense of Community in the Fifteenth-Century Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai Court Chronicle', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 42 (2001), pp. 198-229.

Himalayan foothills.[47]

A third example. In the tenth century the Khmers visited the Chandra capital at Vikrampur, near Dhaka.[48] This mission seems to have had considerable cultural impact, and perhaps there were many such missions between the Chandras and the Khmers, because the first and second Bhatera plaques of the Chandras, dating from the eleventh and twelfth centuries and containing fifty-five and thirty-two lines respectively in Sanskrit in a proto Bengali script, have a style similar to old Khmer inscriptions from Cambodia.[49]

The Khmer influence may not have been restricted to language alone, there may have also been considerable cultural and technological contact, as is evidenced in the friezes, dating five hundred years apart, depicting boats in Cambodia and Bengal. See the similar styles and iconography in images 1 and 2.

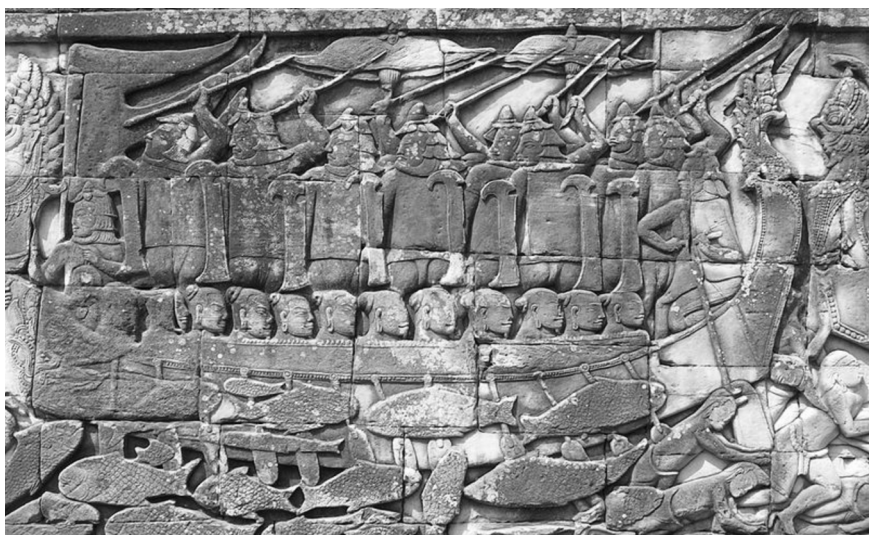

Image 1: Cambodia, Angkor, 12th century

[47] See Jean Boisselier, 'Review: [Untitled], Reviewed Work(s): *Copper-Plates of Sylhet, vol. I (7th-11th Century A.D.)* by Kamalakanta Gupta', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 14/no. 1 (April 1971), pp. 90-4, p. 92.
[48] Boisselier, Loc. Cit.
[49] Ibid., p. 93.

Image 2: Jor Bangla Temple, Bishnupur, West Bengal, 17th century

Despite these new partnerships, by the tenth century even the silver Harikela coins ceased circulation in Bengal, implying a cessation of the Burma trade that brought in silver.[50] When the Muslims conquered Bengal at the start of the thirteenth century, the treasury was practically empty.[51] Had Arab and Persian traders

[50] Nicholas G. Rhodes, Trade in South-East Bengal in the First Millennium C.E..' in Rila Mukherjee (ed.), *Pelagic Passageways*, see pp. 269, 273. The reasons are also explored in Rila Mukherjee, 'Silver Links! Bagan-Bengal and the Metal Corridors into Bengal: 9th to 13th Centuries', paper presented at the international meeting 'Early Myanmar and Its Global Connections'.

[51] As Deyell notes, at the beginning of the thirteenth century metallic sources were very sparse in the Bengal treasury. See John S. Deyell, 'The China Connection: Problems of Silver Supply in Medieval Bengal', in John F. Richards (ed.), *Precious Metals in the Later Medieval and Early Modern Worlds* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1983), pp. 207-27. Reprinted in Sanjay Subrahmanyam (ed.), *Money and the Market in India 1100-1700* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 112-36. Silver flowed in only from the end of the thirteenth century once the Bengal Sultanate started trade with other Islamic states across the Indian Ocean.

who were present on the Bengal coast from the eighth-ninth centuries diverted the remaining silver? We do not know, and lack quantifiable data for any assertion. The accounts attributed to the Arab trader Suleiman al-Tajir c. 851 CE notice that Bengal had reverted to a *kauri* economy at this time, despite the fact that it possessed silver and gold.[52]

As late as towards the end of the thirteenth century Marco Polo mentioned the use of *kauris* in Bengal's uplands although the region had gold and silver.[53] Stargardt mentions Marco Polo as noting that Arakan exchanged smuggled gold from Bagan (there was a lot of gold there and yet there was an interdiction against its export) for silver in the ratio of one to five,[54] which made gold very lucrative for the smuggling trade and also gave Arakan practically a monopoly on the silver trade with Bengal. My reading of Polo's *Travels* suggests however that this was not done in Arakan; it was carried out in Yunnan-fu (Marco Polo's

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[52] At the port of 'Samandar' trade was carried out using *kauri* (cowrie) shells, which were the current money of the country (southeastern Bengal delta), although Suleiman said they (the country) also had gold and silver. In Syed Murtaza Ali, *History of Chittagong* (Dacca: Standard Publishers, 1964), p. 10. See too, Eusebius Renaudot, *Ancient Accounts of India and China By Two Mohammedan Travellers who went to Those Parts in the Ninth Century* (London: 1733 & rpt; New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1995), p. 17.

[53] Thomas Wright, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, pp. 175, 184-6. © 2002 Blackmask Online. http://www.blackmask.com, accessed 11 August 2010.

[54] Janice Stargardt, 'Burma's Economic and Diplomatic Relations', p. 60. Bin Yang notes that:

> the value of silver in Yunnan during the Yuan period can be seen from Marco Polo's records at the end of the 1280s when he was sent by Khubilai Khan through Yunnan to Burma. He mentioned that in the Kunming area eight taels of silver equaled one tael of gold. In the Gold Teeth area where gold was relatively abundant, five taels of silver were exchanged for one tael of gold. This favorable rate lured merchants who sought to make great profits from their silver.

See Bin Yang, *Between Winds and Clouds*, chap. 6, p. 8.

Vochang, also identified as Bagan) and in the shadowy area between Yunnan and Mien (Bagan).[55]

So, where did the silver go?

And what happened in Bengal between the ninth and twelfth centuries?

V
An Eleventh Century Economic Crisis Rather Than an Eleventh Century Trade Revolution in Bengal?

Chaudhuri suggested that, in the eleventh century, the Fatimids and the Songs at the two ends of the Indian Ocean initiated a long distance trade whereby distant and marginal sectors of the Indian Ocean world were drawn into a 'trade revolution'. Regional produce now supplemented this long distance trade and emporia ports began to appear along the shores of the Indian Ocean.[56] Hermann Kulke added the Cholas to the list and thus talked of a similar trade revolution in the Bay of Bengal.[57] However, we find no such indications in the northern Bay of Bengal, except perhaps in the case of Bagan, as we shall see later.

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[55] Ronald Latham (tr. and intr.), *The Travels of Marco Polo* (London/ New York: Penguin, 1958), pp. 181-2, 187. The Marsden and Wright editions mention that the natives who brought in the gold came from the mountains between Yunnan and Mien (Burma). This was possibly the Shan area. See William Marsden (tr. and ed.), *The Travels of Marco Polo The Venetian,* re-edited by Thomas Wright (London: Henry Bohn, 1854), p. 298.

[56] K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[57] Herman Kulke, 'Rivalry and Competition in the Bay of Bengal and its Bearing on Indian Ocean Studies' in Om Prakash and Denys Lombard (eds.), *Commerce and Culture Culture in the Bay of Bengal 1500-1800* (New Delhi: Manohar/ICHR, 1999), pp. 17-35; Herman Kulke, 'The Naval Expeditions of the Cholas in the Context of Asian History', in Hermann Kulke et al. (eds.), *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa*, pp. 1-19.

Below is an account, case by case, of what was happening to Bengal at this time.

Lessening Navigation and Commerce

We have no direct evidence regarding this question but the following points are of interest. There seems to have been a decline in sailings to Southeast Asia from Bengal after the eighth century, although the two deltas continued to be economically important. But the commerce thus generated failed to produce any lasting indigenous networks as compared to the larger commercial networks that we observe in the southern Bay at this time, and which will be elaborated upon later.

Was the Bengal-Southeast Asia trade affected? Remember that Tamralipta was already in decline, and there was a crisis of coinage in the western Bengal delta. The most important state to Bengal's east, Bagan, followed a redistributive economic model from the ninth century, where gold, silver, paddy raised as taxes, and plunder were ploughed back into the economy for temple and monastery construction.

Further south, Java offers more evidence to support the thesis of declining commercial and navigational activities from Bengal. Wisseman Christie's evidence from Java between AD 883 and 1305 does not mention any merchant group from Bengal.[58] The Kaladi inscription of AD 909 from the Brantas Delta mentions the existence of foreigners, including those from Kalingga (Kalinga), the Singhalese, Dravidians, the Campa (Chams), the Kmir (Khmer) and the Rman (Mons). That from Palabuhan of AD 928 notes persons engaged in royal tax collection from Singhala, Pandikira people (from southern India) and the Rmen (Ramañña). An earlier ninth century copper plate inscription from Kuti also mentioned a range of foreigners present in the area,

[58] Jan Wisseman Christie, 'Javanese Markets and the Asian Sea Trade Boom of the Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries A. D. ', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 41/no. 3 (1998), pp. 344-81, see pp. 366-9.

including those from Cempa (Champa), Kling (Kalinga), Singha (Sri Lanka), Gola [Bengal, not identified. Joan Blaeu discusses a city in Bengal called Gullo or Goli: author],[59] Malyala (Malabar), Reman (Ramañña) and Kmir (Khmer). This is the only time, to the best of my knowledge, that people from Bengal are specifically mentioned. The Cane inscription of 1021 CE records foreigners from Kling, Aryya, Singhala, Pandikira, Drawida, Campa, Remen and Kmir.[60]

Political Decline

By the ninth century almost all the mainland trading partners of Bengal - the Pyu Empire, Nan Zhao in Yunnan, Tibet, Nepal and T'ang China - witnessed political decline. Weakening Chinese control over Central Asia from the eighth century (by 763 CE China had lost control over the Central Asian route) and the wars with Nan Zhao in the eighth and ninth centuries meant that the routes into Bengal were progressively threatened. There were armed conflicts along the Taklamakan and the Yunnan-Burma areas and this may be one of the reasons for the decline of the land routes and the rise of a maritime trade between China and India from the ninth century.[61]

Trade Reorientation

In the ninth century therefore, as Malekandathil notes, the northern Bay missed out on the trade impetus provided by Abbassid Persia and T'ang China. He writes:

> This was a time when long distance trade circuits between Abbassid Persia (750-1258) and T'ang China

[59] Joan Blaeu, *Le Grand Atlas, Cosmographie Blaviane*, 12 vols. (1663), Amsterdam, Theatrum Orbis Terrarum Ltd., 1968. See vol. 11, L'Asie, plate Magni Mogolis Imperium, p. 195.
[60] Geoff Wade, 'An Early Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia, 900–1300 C.E.', pp. 250-1.
[61] Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade*, pp. 211, 213.

> (618-907) had incorporated several ports and regional economies of maritime India into their orbits … the Indian Ocean was subdivided into several interlocking circuits, each being controlled by a set of political and economic actors who resorted to different methods and devices to translate trade profits into political assets … the very shifting of the capital from Damascus to Baghdad was motivated by the desire of the Abbassids to appropriate a sizeable chunk of profit accruing from the trade in the Indian Ocean.[62]

Malabar, not the Bengal coast, was the beneficiary of this network, paving the way for the long Chinese interaction with the Malabar and Ma'abar coasts, and southern Chinese ships subsequently appeared with bullion to buy goods at the Malabar ports, as Marco Polo noted in the thirteenth century.[63]

A Lack of Metals and Disappearance of Coinage

There was a generalized decline of coinage in circulation at this time, and not just in Bengal. Gutman notes that the whole of the northern Bay region experienced a decline of coinage in the ninth-tenth centuries, including Bagan, Sukhotai and Angkor. She tells us that there were 'no local coins from the rest of mainland southeast Asia after the fall of Funan and Dvaravati, their function being replaced by barter, cowrie shells and standardized metal bars or lumps'.[64] Coins came back only from the fourteenth century.

There was a similar drainage of metals from China from 1074, which led to interdictions on coin export and attempts at paper

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[62] Pius Malekandathil, *Maritime India*, *Trade, Religion and Polity in the Indian Ocean* (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2010), p. 63.
[63] Ronald Latham (tr. and intr.), *The Travels of Marco Polo*, p. 290.
[64] Pamela Gutman, 'The Ancient Coinage of Southeast Asia', *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 66/no. 1 (1978), pp. 8-21, citing R. le May, *The Coinage of Siam*, (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1932), pp. 3-9, see p. 9.

money by the later Songs[65] and then by the Yuans. Rockhill notes: 'an illicit trade in (aromatics and jewels) had developed to a dangerous extent, and that the Chinese engaged in this smuggling were paying nearly exclusively for the goods brought from abroad in gold, silver, iron and especially in copper cash, and the drain was such as to cause the Government very serious concern'.[66]

In 1074 Chang Fang-p'ing mentioned carts loaded down with cash that were crossing the frontiers of China and seafaring junks that were leaving Chinese ports on their return voyage with full cargoes of cash, so that, notwithstanding every effort and the emission of more cash, the currency was drained off like the waters of the sea, into the sea. In 1127 the High Ministers of State called the Throne's attention to the prejudice to the State through the coming of many ships to its ports laden with useless goods. Three years later an official (Hsuau-fu-shih) called Ch'ang Chun memorialized against the great waste of money through the Arab trade in precious stones and useless things. In 1194 we read of Wang Chu-an, then governor of the Hsing-hua military district in Fu-kien, refusing to allow the people under his jurisdiction to go beyond its borders to trade with foreign people whose many ships coming from abroad, laden with aromatics, rhinoceros horns, ivory and kingfishers' feathers were already draining all the copper cash out of the land.[67]

It is seductive to speculate that what was happening was *not* an absence of silver coins in circulation but a *paucity* of coins in face of an ever-expanding Indian Ocean trade at this time. Bengal switched from the silver for *kauri* trade to a trade in rice for *kauri*

[65] For early and mid Song financial initiatives and constraints see Christian Lamouroux, 'Militaires et financiers dans la Chine des Song', *Buletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient*, vol. 87/no. 1 (2000), pp. 283–300.

[66] W. W. Rockhill, 'Notes on the Relations and Trade of China with the Eastern Archipelago and the Coast of the Indian Ocean during the Fourteenth Century', Part IV: *T'oung Pao*, Second Series, vol. 16/no. 4 (October 1915), pp. 435-67, see pp. 420-1.

[67] Ibid., p. 422.

at the same time,[68] indicating that surplus in regional produce was finding markets elsewhere along the Indian Ocean, thereby circumventing the necessity for minted coinage. A recent study of the West Java Sea Intan wreck of *c*. 940 CE by Hall too cautions us against reading too much into an absence of coinage. Hall writes: 'The absence of large quantities of coinage among the ship's remains suggests that the traders did not need coinage to conduct business, but engaged in commodity trade and used local currencies where it was available in Southeast Asia at that time'.[69]

The maritime routes too were in considerable flux. Nan Zhao's raids against Pyu centres must have disrupted both land and sea routes for silver into the Bengal delta, as did its raids against Tibet, another source of silver for Bengal.[70] The numismatic evidence confirms this. The last Arakan coinage hoards date to the ninth-tenth centuries, as do coins from Mon sites.[71] The confusion attendant upon the defeat of the Pyu Empire by Nan Zhao in 832 CE and the rise of Bagan in the interior in 849 CE must have created even more uncertainties in monetary transactions for the northern Bay of Bengal kingdoms.

Environmental Factors

We must also remember that the physical environment of the northern Bay of Bengal had always placed, historically, certain restrictions on shipping. The navigational style and cycle, dictated

[68] Rila Mukherjee, 'Introduction', in Rila Mukherjee (ed.), *Pelagic Passageways*, p. 145.
[69] Kenneth R. Hall, 'Indonesia's Evolving International Relationships in the Ninth to early Eleventh Centuries: Evidence from Contemporary Shipwrecks and Epigraphy', *Indonesia*, vol. 90 (October 2010), pp. 1-31, proof copy sent me by Kenneth Hall, see pp. 6, 29.
[70] Kenneth R. Hall, Chap. 4: 'Economic History of Early Southeast Asia', in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, vol.1, Part 1, from early times to c. 1500, Nicholas Tarling (ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, paperback 1999), pp. 183-275, see pp. 246-48.
[71] Pamela Gutman, 'The Ancient Coinage of Southeast Asia'. See p. 9.

by frequent cyclones in the north Bay, conditioned a particular kind of commerce: sailing remained largely coastal in nature, stopping at small ports along the way, disposing of goods, picking up others and so on, as it moved along the coast, what the French call *cabotage* and what Van Leur called a 'peddling trade'.[72] How far this factor retarded shipping, and how far technology developed to combat the hostile seascape is worth investigating.

Technology

Lastly, technology development and transfers. The development of technology is closely associated with the openness of a port and its receptivity to, and acceptance of, new ideas. Dialogue is an indispensable part of this process.

Until the tenth century Bengal had a monopoly across the Bay of Bengal in making and exporting Buddhist votive icons although we do not know when their manufacture started. This was a triangular trade involving the Malay, Bengal and Javanese ports, in that order. Hall, for example, cites the case of small, bronze Buddha icons originally made in Bengal from Kedah tin that were found in the Intan wreck, and surmises that Kedah possibly began to reproduce these icons and ship them to the Javanese ports in the tenth century. Moulds for bronze and terracotta miniature

[72] See Radhamadhav Datta, *Manasa Panchali*, Amalendu Bhattacharjee (ed.), (Calcutta: Mahajati Prakashan, 2004), p. 168; Jacob Cornelius Van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History*, vol. 1 (The Hague, Bandung: W. van Hoeve, 1955); for a more recent exposition of Van Leur's concept, see Hans-Dieter Evers, 'Traditional Trading Networks of Southeast Asia', *Archipel*, vol. 35/no. 1 (1988), pp. 89–100. This is also seen from the *Mangal Kavyas*, which give us an idea of Bengali mercantile activity prior to the sixteenth century wherein it is suggested that the trade was mainly coastal. An example is the route taken by Chand Saudagar of the *Manasa Panchali* (composed in south-eastern Bengal), where he sets off from the Chattagrama area, not through any major port but via various shallow creeks that ultimately gave access on to the open sea.

Buddhist shrines were found in the Intan wreck as well,[73] enabling us to speculate that these were manufactured in Java as well, by the tenth century. Can we then hypothesize that there was a technological stagnation along with a downturn in trade in Bengal in the tenth century?

VI
Bengal, the Eleventh Century Trade Revolution and Its Aftermath

The Warring Bay World of the Eleventh Century

It is also attractive to speculate that commercial stagnation made the northern Bay vulnerable to predators from the southern Bay of Bengal. The Cholas sought to control the eastern coast and thereby extend their commercial realm up into Bengal, as demonstrated in their attack on Bengal in 1022-3 CE and a series of attacks on Srivijaya-held ports from 1025. The Cholas then moved on to attack Tambralinga in the Malay Peninsula in 1030 CE.

In fact Chola expeditions generated considerable turmoil in the Bay of Bengal.[74] In 1057 CE Aniruddha of Bagan conquered Thaton in lower Burma in order to forestall the Khmer advance - a move which gave Bagan access to the Bay, it thereby becoming a southern Bay of Bengal player; in 1067 CE the Cholas attacked Kadaram (Takuapa, also known as old Kedah, the west coast [Siam] port terminus of the Persian-Arab trade until the mid eleventh century, according to some), destroying earlier networks and paving the way for a Burmese military presence at Kadaram.

[73] Kenneth R. Hall, 'Indonesia's Evolving International Relationships', pp. 6-7.
[74] See Hermann Kulke, K. Kesavapany and Vijay Sakhuja (eds.), *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa*.

From 1100-1300

This seems as much a period of cooperation as of conflict. Warring kingdoms appeared on both sides of the deltas. Large parts of the western Bengal delta were conquered by the Muslims at the beginning of the thirteenth century, while the southeastern delta felt the effects of the Mongol invasions soon after.[75] Dali fell to the Mongols in 1253 and was used subsequently as a springboard by the Mongols to conquer China and start the Yuan dynasty.

Bagan, which was also toppled by the Mongols in 1287, had hardly interacted with Bengal except with the polity of Pattikera at this time, possibly by way of the Buddhist complex of Mainamati-Lalmai,[76] and had only repaired the monastery at Bodh Gaya in the twelfth century through the initiative of Kyanzittha of Bagan, both events indicating westward links.[77] Such connections suggest that land and fluvial routes between Bagan and south - eastern Bengal were active at that time.

From around 1250 eight new sub-systems appeared on the world map. Note that sectors IV and V intersected in Bengal. These sub-systems are shown in Figure 1.

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[75] For the rise and demise of 'small' kingdoms to Bengal's northeast, see Rila Mukherjee, 'Between Land and Sea: The Integration of 'Small' Polities into a Northern Bay of Bengal Economic System Between the 9th and 19th centuries', paper read at Empires and Networks: Maritime Asian Experiences 9th to 19th Centuries, 2011, at Singapore and forthcoming Singapore: Nalanda Sriwijaya Centre.

[76] Tilman Frasch, 'Coastal Peripheries during the Pagan Period', in Jos Gommans and Jacques P. Leider (eds.), *The Maritime Frontier of Burma*, pp. 59-78; Robert S. Wicks, *Money, Markets and Trade in Early Southeast Asia: The Development of Indigenous Monetary Systems to A.D. 1400* (Ithaca: Cornell Press, SEAP Publications, 1992), p. 131, suggests Pattikera formed part of Narapatisithu's domains at the end of the twelfth century.

[77] Janice Stargardt, 'Burma's Economic and Diplomatic Relations', pp. 53, 57-8, 60.

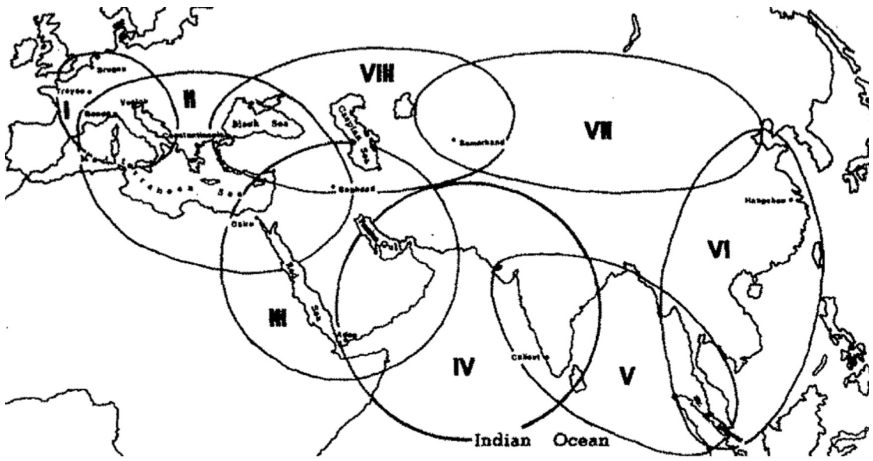

Figure 1: From Janet Abu-Lughod, 'The Shape of the World System in the Thirteenth Century', *Studies in Comparative Historical Developments*, Winter 1987-8, pp. 3-25, p. 8. Available at https://web1.caryacademy.org/facultywebs/joe_staggers/Europe_Lectures/11_12_EURO/sources/Tri_1/Abu_L_world_system.pdf, accessed February 1, 2013.

Within Bengal new links were forged with peninsular India at this time. As the Senas consolidated their rule in Bengal new trade routes emerged connecting present-day Karnataka - which is where the Senas came from - and Bengal. The routes between the south and east privileged the western Bengal delta. The *padinen-vishayam* of the Chola merchant guilds (in an inscription at Nagapattinam *c*. 1090 CE) refers to the 'eighteen countries', one of which was Vangam, or Bengal.[78] A new regional economy was therefore taking shape in Bengal, linking it to the north, west

[78] N. Karashima and Y. Subbarayalu, 'Goldsmiths and Padinen-vishayam: A Bronze Buddha Image of Nagapattinam', in Noboru Karashima, (ed.), *Ancient and Medieval Commercial Activities in the Indian Ocean: Testimony of Inscriptions and Ceramic Shards*, Report of the Taisho University Research Project 1997-2000 (Tokyo: Taisho University, 2002), pp. 57-61. See fn. 10, p. 59.

and south. The western links would be even more furthered once the Bengal Sultanate consolidated itself, stretching all the way to the Red Sea.

But what of Bengal's position in the Bay of Bengal at this time? Sectors IV and V of Figure 1 also show the Bay of Bengal world, and it is here that we must turn our lens on Tambralinga and the southern Bay of Bengal.

Tambralinga, identified with Nakhon Si Thammaraj, was a Malay state with political designs on Angkor. Despite sending missions to China in the early part of the eleventh century, it was dismissed as a tributary state of the second rank.[79] It was important in maritime trade as an entrepot as well as for producing the *gharu* wood used in incense. After the Chola attack of Tambralinga in the eleventh century, Sri Lanka and Bagan, two polities at opposite ends of the Bay, increasingly came to dominate Tambralinga politics. Bagan had started expanding southward from 1057, but it is likely that Sri Lanka was the dominant force in the southern Bay. At twelfth to fourteenth-century settlement sites in south Kedah, Sri Lankan coins, rather than Chinese copper coins, have been reportedly recovered in large numbers, suggesting that Sri Lankan coinage was adopted by these settlements as a form of domestic currency.[80] It is clear that Sri Lanka was emerging as a powerful economic force in the southern Bay of Bengal. Until the demise of Bagan, powerful player in the Bay and paragon of Buddhist virtues, in 1287, Sri Lanka, Bagan and the Pandyans, not Bengal, were the chief players here.

Until the thirteenth century Tambralinga was a pivot in politics of the southern Bay, also having asserted its independence in that

[79] Michel Jacq-Hergoualc'h, *The Malay Peninsula: Crossroads of the Maritime Silk Road (100 B.C. - 1300 A.D.)*, (tr.) Victoria Hobson (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

[80] Derek Thiam Soon Heng, 'Export Commodity and Regional Currency: The Role of Chinese Copper Coins in the Melaka Straits, Tenth to Fourteenth Centuries', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 37/no. 2 (June 2006), pp. 179–203. See p. 184.

century. It attacked Sri Lanka in AD 1247 and controlled the northern part of the island. But its move to take over the whole island was frustrated by the Pandyans who attacked Tambralinga in alliance with Sri Lanka. Fukami writes that Tambralinga collapsed at the end of the thirteenth century due to two factors: as Java exerted pressure on Malayu, the latter pressed down on Tambralinga from the south, while Xian, breaking away from Zhen La, pressed on Tambralinga from the north.[81]

The evidence from Tambralinga shows that the entire southern Bay area was undergoing a tremendous political and economic upheaval between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, and we do not know what role the Bengal deltas played in this upheaval. We only know that there was a Pandyan attack on Bengal in 1265.

The three Theravadin powers - Sri Lanka, Bagan and Tambralinga - constantly attacked each other. Bagan, under the guise of seeking votive relics, expanded its reach southward in the Bay. This action had already clashed with other networks. The supposed conflict between Alaungsithu of Bagan and Parakramabahu of Polonnaruva in Sri Lanka in the middle of the twelfth century, both Theravadin powers, was over trade and trade rights.[82] We see therefore that religion and trade operated also conflictually in the Bay.

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[81] Fukami Sumio, 'The Long Thirteenth Century of Tambralinga: From Javaka to Siam', *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko*, no. 62 (2004), pp. 45-79. Xian is now identified, tentatively, with Ayutthaya or maybe Ligor, and not Sukhothai as Pelliot (Paul Pelliot, 'Deux itinéraires de Chine en Inde à la fin du VIIIe siècle', *Bulletin of the Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient*, vol. 4/no. 1 (1904), pp. 131–413) suggested. Ayutthaya is the more likely candidate. See Yoneo Ishi, 'A Note on the Identification of a Group of Siamese Port Polities along the Bay of Thailand', *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko*, vol. 61 (2003), pp. 75-80; see also Yoneo Ishi, 'Exploring a New Approach to early Thai History, *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 92 (2004), pp. 37-42.

[82] Anura Manatunga, 'Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia during the Period of the Polonnaruva Kingdom' in Hermann Kulke et al. (eds.), *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa*, pp. 193-207, see pp. 198-99.

Sri Lanka consolidated itself further in the thirteenth century: in 1283, Bhuvanekabahu I, king of Sri Lanka, sent an envoy to the Mamluk ruler of Egypt seeking a diplomatic and trade exchange, trying to bypass Persian Gulf-linked India west coast-based middlemen and offering pearls and precious stones, vessels, elephants, muslins, brazilwood and cinnamon.[83] Sri Lanka continued to maintain its central position in the trade of the Indian Ocean and in the fifteenth century Parakaramabahu VI (1412-68) of Sri Lanka sent five tribute missions to China between 1412 and 1459.

What does this tell us of religious interests in the Bay? Like Bagan, Sri Lanka was Theravadin although we saw that this did not stop it from waging war against Pagan. Tambralinga, although Theravadin in belief, nevertheless attacked another Theravadin state, Sri Lanka, in 1247. Therefore commercial interests possibly predominated over religious affinities.

Bengal moved away from its Mahayanist leanings and emerged as a leading centre of Vajrayana Buddhism during this time, interacting with sectors VI and VII of Figure 1.

Religious Change

Linked with the impulses of a maritime economy were religious stimuli. Hall writes that:

> … from the tenth century, three new centers of international Buddhism emerged. India's Bihar-Bengal region, with Tibet and Central Asian connections, was the initial center in the evolution of Tantric Buddhism, under the patronage of the Pala rulers of northeast India. That there were also commercial implications to this Buddhist pilgrimage networking is demonstrated in the

[83] 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*, vol. 53 (2010), pp. 109-145. See pp. 111-2.

> Cola raids against the wealthy commercial centers of the Bengal coast line prior to their naval expeditions against the Srivijaya commercial realm in 1024/5 (Sen 2001: 239; Spencer 1982). In that same era, Sri Lanka became the center of a revitalized Theravada Buddhism, which especially flourished after a period of Cola interregnum that ended in the late eleventh century (Gunawardana 2001). Meanwhile, China emerged as the new center of Buddhism's Mahayana sects. Significantly, each of these new Buddhist schools was centered in a strategically important region of the international trade.[84]

Mahayanist Buddhism predominated until at least the twelfth century (T'ang and Song China, Champa, Vietnam, Korea, Japan), as also among the Palas of Bengal and Srivijaya, when Yuan patronage of Tantric Buddhism added another dimension to religious stimuli along the Bay and 'Yuan patronage of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism over the prior Chinese Mahayana Buddhist schools placed the Yuan court in a position to conduct diplomatic discussions with Java's thirteenth-century court, as fellow practitioners of Tantric Buddhism'.[85] Bengal as leading centre of Tantric Buddhism also interacted with the Yuan world, by way of the overland routes, less by sea. See sectors VI and VII in Figure 1. Religious shifts occurred simultaneously.

But Tantric or Vajrayana Buddhism was not adopted uniformly across the northern Bay. Bagan became the centre of Theravada Buddhism, and this Theravadin network linked it with the other major Theravadin player, Sri Lanka, in the southern Bay.

In the thirteenth century, we notice a shift in Tambralinga, possibly a Srivijayan port, from the earlier Mahayana Buddhist associations with Srivijaya toward Theravada Buddhism. What

[84] Kenneth R. Hall, 'Local and International Trade and Traders in the Straits of Melaka Region: 600-1500', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 47 / no. 2, 2004, pp. 213-60, pp. 217-18.
[85] Ibid., p. 219.

accounted for this change is not certain[86] and Srivijaya's relationship with Tambralinga has been a subject of much speculation.[87] Perhaps Tambralinga adopted Theravada Buddhism because the two chief thirteenth century players in the Bay - Sri Lanka and Bagan - were also Theravadin and Tambralinga hoped to derive commercial benefits by accessing this particular religious-commercial network? One can only speculate.

From 1300-into the 1500s

At the start of the fourteenth century, various regional units and sub-systems were observable within the categories of the western and eastern Indian oceans. Both K.N. Chaudhuri and Abu-Lughod saw three circuits in the Indian Ocean: the Arabian Sea circuit, the Bay of Bengal circuit and the South China Sea circuit.[88]

While Chaudhuri saw this world in terms of prevailing wind and monsoon patterns, which determined the three circuits of trade,[89] Abu-Lughod saw the larger Indian Ocean space as a single world system made up of four world economies— West European, Islamic, Indic and Chinese. Within the space of a single Indian Ocean, much like Chaudhuri, she envisaged two sub units that lay in the east - the Bay of Bengal and the China Seas as opposed to one sub unit in the west - the Arabian Sea.[90] See Figure 2.

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[86] O. W. Wolters, 'Tâmbralinga', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, vol. 21/nos. 1-3 (1958), pp. 587-607, see p. 600.

[87] George Coedès, 'Le royaume de Çrvijaya', *Bulletin of the Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient*, vol. 18/no. 1 (1918), pp. 1–36, see p. 32; see also R.C. Majumdar, 'IV. Les rois Šailendra de Suvarnadvîpa', *Bulletin of the Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient*, vol. 33/no. 1 (1933), pp. 121–41; K.A.N. Sastri, 'I. Sri Vijaya', *Bulletin of the Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient*, vol.40/no. 2 (1940), pp. 239-313.

[88] K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization*; Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System 1250-1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[89] Ibid., Map 9, p. 41.

[90] Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, pp. 251-3.

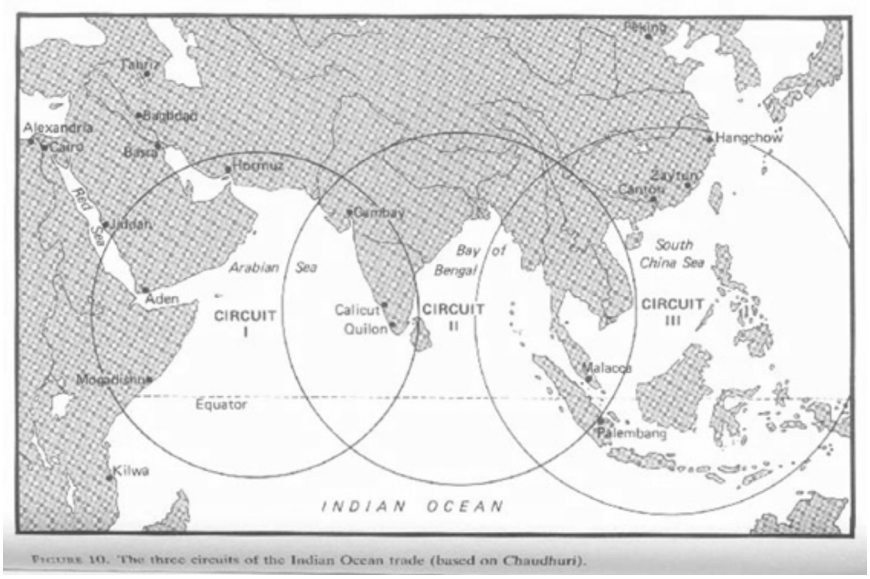

FIGURE 10. The three circuits of the Indian Ocean trade (based on Chaudhuri).

Figure 2: From Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, p. 252

China ruled the second and third circuits in the fifteenth century and Bengal sent as many as 14 missions to China for trade, diplomacy and protection, exporting as many as 24 items to China and ranking third in the number of Chinese missions sent: Calicut received 8 missions, Kochi 6 and Bengal 4.[91]

Hall further segments the circuits and underlines five sub-units in the eastern Indian Ocean: a Bay of Bengal network, a Melaka Straits network, a South China Sea network, a Java Sea network and a Sulu Sea network.[92]

Figure 3, largely similar to Figure 4 shown further on, is presented here as it shows the main political divisions and coastal nodes in the larger Bay of Bengal world. By contrast Figure 4, which is only a map of coastlines, the interior being left blank, brings the five circuits into greater detail and informs us that these circuits were in place as early as 1000 CE.

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[91] Rila Mukherjee, *Strange Riches: Bengal in the Mercantile Map of Southasia* (Delhi: Foundation Books, 2006), p. 122.

[92] Kenneth R. Hall, 'Ports-of-Trade, Maritime Diasporas, and Networks of Trade..', See Map 1, p. 111.

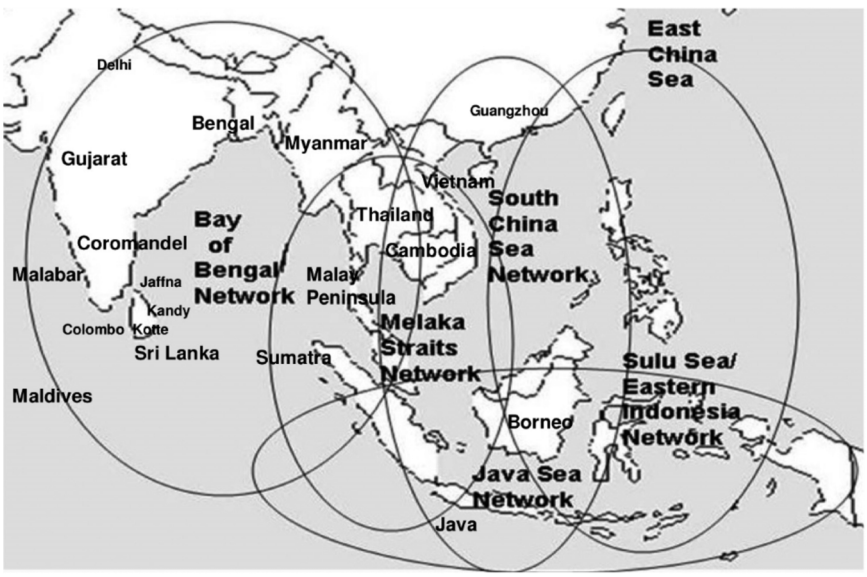

Figure 3: From Hall, 'Ports-of-Trade, Maritime Diasporas, and Networks of Trade and Cultural Integration in the Bay of Bengal Region…', 2010, pp. 109-45, p. 111.

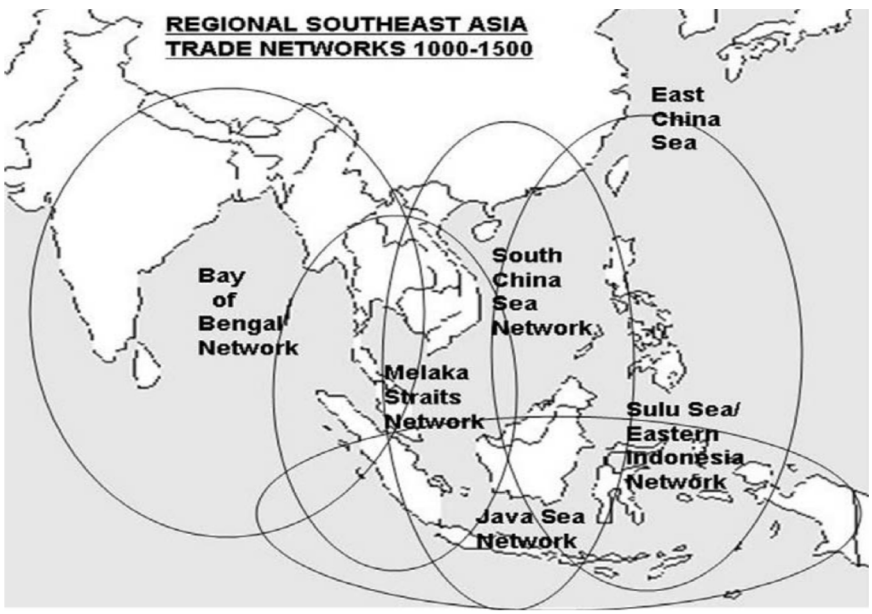

Figure 4: From Hall, 'Local and International Trade and Traders in the Straits of Melaka Region: 600-1500', *JESHO*, vol. 47 / no. 2, 2004, pp. 213-60, p. 219.

VII
Once More Units and Sub-Units in the Indian Ocean

Three other regional units that were visible in the sixteenth century but have not attracted much attention have only recently come into scholarly notice. The first sub-unit was the Maldivian in the western Indian Ocean; a unit closely linked with the north Malabar ports, and which emerged as a significant staging-point for shipping between Achin, the Gujarat ports and the Red Sea ports as response to Portuguese expansion in the sixteenth century.[93] This unit also had a long and established relation with the Bengal and Orissa ports for over a millennium, which was a matrimonial as well as the well-known rice for *kauri* (also known as cowrie, or *cypria moneta*) network, the Malabar coast being historically quite deficient in rice production.[94]

[93] Genevieve Bouchon, *Mamale de Cananor: un adversaire de l'Inde portugaise (1507-1528)*, Geneve/Paris: Droz, 1975, in English as *The Regent of the Sea: Cannanore's Response to Portuguese Expansion, 1507-28* (French Studies in South Asian Culture & Society), OUP India, 1988; Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Southeast Asia as Seen From Mughal India: Tahir Muhammad's Immaculate Garden (circa 1600)', *Archipel*, 70, Paris, 2005, pp. 209-37, p. 229.

[94] Rila Mukherjee, 'Introduction', in Rila Mukherjee (ed.), *Pelagic Passageways*. The Malabar Coast was historically deficient in rice production. Rice came from Bengal, and this was a very old network if we consider the rice for *kauri* network between Bengal and the Maldives that we see in evidence from prior centuries. See Rila Mukherjee, 'Introduction', pp. 169-70; W. W. Rockhill, 'Notes on the Relations and Trade of China,' p. 448 for the fourteenth century; Ralph Fitch (1583-91) in William Foster (ed.), *Early Travels in India 1583-1619* (rpt; New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1985), p. 44 for the sixteenth century. Both sources mention that the rice came into Quilon, a rice deficient area because of its rocky, barren soil (W.W. Rockhill, 'Notes', p. 448). For rice imports into Cochin, provenance not specified, see Table 5.1 in Pius Malekandathil, 'The Portuguese and the dynamics of Intra-Asian Trade, 1500-1663', in Om Prakash (ed.), *The Trading World of the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800*, Vol. III, Part 7 of D.P. Chattapadhyaya (ed.), *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization* (Delhi, Chennai, Chandigarh: Pearson, 2012), pp. 185-212, see pp. 199-200.

The second was in the central Indian Ocean, highlighted as a spatial-historical category by Jorge Manuel Flores, and called the 'Sea of Ceylon'.[95] This 'regional sub-system',[96] within the totality of Asian maritime networks, linked up with the Bay of Bengal commercial system.[97] The port of Kayalpatnam of the Madurai sultanate on the Coromandel Coast was the node linking the Sea of Ceylon trade with the northern Bay of Bengal - Bengal emerging as a much-favoured commercial partner.[98]

Within the Bay of Bengal commercial system there was another sub-unit as we have noted, a northern Bay of Bengal regional system.[99] This unit historically connected the Coromandel Coast, the western and southeastern Bengal deltas, southern China (Yunnan), northern Burma, the Shan states and Arakan in the present states of India, Bangladesh, China and Myanmar respectively, and also segued into the central and western Indian Oceans, notably Sri Lanka and the Maldives Islands.

This unit, as we had read, was not a wholly maritime unit as were the other two units, containing within it a mix of fluvial, land and sea routes instead. The fluvial/land routes were vital for

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[95] Jorge Manuel Flores, 'Portuguese Entrepreneurs in the Sea of Ceylon Mid-Sixteenth Century' in Karl Anton Sprengard and Roderich Ptak (eds.), *Maritime Asia: Profit Maximisation, Ethics and Trade Structure* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994), pp. 125-50.

[96] J.M. Flores, 'Portuguese Entrepreneurs...', p. 126.

[97] Lipi Ghosh, 'Thai Trade in the Indian Ocean: The Contexts of Pre Colonial Bay of Bengal Port Management' , in Rila Mukherjee (ed.), *Oceans Connect*, pp. 241-47.

[98] Jorge Manuel Flores, ' "Cael Velho", "Calepatanão" and "Punicale". The Portuguese and the Tambraparni Ports in the Sixteenth Century', *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient*, Tome 82 (1995), pp. 9-26, see pp. 15, 18.

[99] Rila Mukherjee, 'Introduction' in Rila Mukherjee (ed.), *Pelagic Passageways*.

connecting to Yunnan and China from Bengal/Assam through Bagan/Ava and the Shan states.

But in the sixteenth a new network appeared, extending even further the spatial dimensions of the northern Bay of Bengal unit. With the furthering of unofficial Portuguese-Ottoman links in Hurmuz and Basra from 1546-7, the port of Cochin on the Malabar Coast, which already imported rice from Bengal, became the major exporter of smuggled pepper to the Bengal ports, Thomaz informing us that Cochin was the relay port used by the Portuguese before Goa from where the pepper would sail by the Cape Route into Portugal.[100] Those exporting pepper from the Bengal ports into China would henceforth use these fluvial/land routes into China,[101] also using those ports not controlled by the Portuguese.

The three circuits, the western or the Maldives circuit, the central or the Sea of Ceylon circuit, and the eastern – and within it - the northern Bay of Bengal circuit, were linked by the Portuguese pepper network, which the Ottomans breached in the period from the 1530s to the 1560s. The Portuguese controlled only the central, i.e. the Ceylon circuit, and the Maldives and the Bengal-Southeast Asian circuits were, despite Portuguese efforts, beyond Portuguese control.[102] So, as mentioned, Ottoman traders and ship owners free rode on this unofficial Portuguese-Bengal-China pepper network in the 1540s, in alliance with the Ottomans and Turks settled already in Bengal.[103] Local players - Bengalis,

[100] Luis Filipe F.R. Thomaz, 'Les Portugais dans les mers de l'Archipel au XVIe siècle', *Archipel*, volume 18 (1979), pp. 105-125, p. 118.
[101] Pius Malekandathil, *Maritime India*, pp. 168-74.
[102] Luis Filipe F.R. Thomaz, *A questao da pimenta em Meados do Seculo XVI: Um Debate Politico do Governo de D. Joao de Castro* (Lisboa: CEPCEP, 1998), pp. 47, 88.
[103] Pius Malekandathil, *Maritime India*, p. 172; Rila Mukherjee, 'The Ottomans and the Sixteenth Century Bay of Bengal', paper presented at the First Eurasian Maritime Congress, Istanbul, 2012.

Ottomans and Turks - became significant agents in this new departure.

We see that while the northern Bay of Bengal system was never a closed commercial system it went far beyond the actual region and its uplands in the sixteenth century. In the process it generated networks widely across, and subsequently considerably beyond, the Bay of Bengal, so much so that it ceased to be a regional unit from that time. In the next century, European mercantile companies arrived at Bengal's shores and changed its history for all time to come.

VIII
A Maritime or Riverine Unit?

More than Orissa or Arakan - the other two sectors of the northern Bay of Bengal - Bengal is a land of rivers.[104] This riverine landscape is echoed in the *Mangal Kavya* that appeared in Bengal from the late fifteenth-sixteenth centuries, although these texts celebrate a prior past.[105] The riverine iconography is

[104] Radhakamal Mukherjee, *The Changing Face of Bengal: A Study in Riverine Economy*, Arun Bandopadhyay (intr.) (Kolkata: University of Calcutta, 2008-09).

[105] There are various versions of the *Mangal Kavya* in existence. See Visnu Pala's *Manasa Mangal*, the *Candi Mangal* (*Kabi Kankan Chandi*) of Mukundaram Chakravarty, Bipradas Pipilai's *Manasa Vijay*, Jaynarain's *Candikamangal*, Bharatchandra's *Annadamangal*, the Ramchandra Choudhury (ed. and comp.), *Sri Sri Padmapuran*, (Silchar, Assam: Choudhury Library, 2007), Radhamadhav Datta's *Manasa Panchali*, and many many others. See France Bhattacharya, *La Victoire de Manasa*, *Traduction Francaise du Manasavijaya, poeme Bengali de Vipradasa (XVe)* (Pondichery: IFP/EFEO, 2007); David L. Curley, *Poetry and History: Bengali Mangal-kabya and Social Change in Precolonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2008); Rila Mukherjee, 'Introduction', in Rila Mukherjee (ed.), *Pelagic Passageways*.

also depicted in images 3 to 5 that are reproduced here, and demonstrate the inextricable link between rivers and ordinary folk.

However, Bengal's *maritime* history, as opposed to its riverine history, has been studied from the vantage point of European colonialism, when it became 'the best flower in the Company's garden',[106] and its ancient maritime past was seen as a 'glorious' one: as the birthplace of maritime Buddhism as seen in voyages to Southeast Asia, its ancient naval tradition and the indomitable spirit of its littoral people.

A part of ancient Bengal, known as Gauda, was celebrated for the littoral culture of its sea faring people, being considered as a people whose shelter was the sea.[107] The Dubi inscription of Bhaskaravarman of Kamarupa referred to the 'Gaudas' as being particularly strong in naval warfare.[108] These citations reinforce the fact that by the six century, the 'Gaudas' (the people of Gauda and taken to be proto-Bengalis) were seen as a sea faring people, a fact that was built into the nationalist tradition by R.K. Mookerji in the twentieth century.[109] Not surprisingly, less was written about Bengal's maritime past in the interim once Bengal became a Muslim state, the emphasis passing instead onto Islamic networks of governance, trade and culture.

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[106] R. Barlow and H. Yule (eds.), *The Diary of William Hedges During His Agency in Bengal, 1681-87*, 3 vols. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1887-9). See vol. 1, p. 117.

[107] Sircar writes that in the struggle between the Maukharis and the Gaudas the latter were referred to as 'samudra-asraya'. See D.C. Sircar, *Studies in the Geography of Ancient and Medieval India* (rpt; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990), p. 124.

[108] D.C. Sircar, *Studies*, p. 124.

[109] R. K. Mookerji, *Indian Shipping: A History Of The Sea-borne Trade And Maritime Activity of The Indians From The Earliest Times*, 1912 (rpt; New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1999).

Image 3: Female Figures From a Frieze of the Jor Bangla Temple, Bishnupur, West Bengal, 17thcentury

Image 4: Depiction of Daily Life From Jor Bangla Temple, Bishnupur, West Bengal, 17th century

Image 5: Riverboats from Jor Bangla Temple, Bishnupur, West Bengal, 17th century

IX
Conclusion

This essay made a case for a re-conceptualization of maritime history in general by taking Bengal and the northern Bay of Bengal as case studies. It argued for decolonizing regional history through defining it by ocean spaces rather than land borders, thereby deliberately going across over national frames as seen here in the case of the northern Bay of Bengal.

Therefore this essay also makes a case for a de-centering of the conventional way we view the maritime history of Bengal. Is Bengal a maritime or a riverine space? Or is it both, at different periods in its history? What is the northern Bay of Bengal: a maritime or riverine unit? Or is it a sub-unit?

I will end with these lines by Paul D'Arcy, which encapsulate so well the case I made for identifying a northern Bay of Bengal unit in this essay:

> Most maritime historians specialize in maritime areas bounded and defined by contiguous landmasses. These conceptual maritime regions often artificially restrict or distort the true seafaring range and seaborne interactions of maritime peoples. Colonial history and historiography have accentuated this continental perspective by further dividing sea worlds into worlds perceived to be discrete, restricted and controlled spaces unified by the language of the colonizer. Such

perceived spaces impose colonial order on maritime environments that have always resisted attempts to control and master them by human communities, and upon independent seafaring peoples who have always dwelt beyond the power of the State, or existed at its margins. They represent seascapes of desire by the powerful rather than reflections of reality. It follows that attempts to map and narrate the range and vision of maritime peoples before their domination and marginalization by land-based, numerically or militarily superior, peoples offer a way of decolonizing their history. Part of this decolonizing involves a form of subaltern history whereby the centrality of sea, forever present in the worldview of maritime peoples, is restored to its former central place.[110]

[110] Paul D'Arcy, 'Sea Worlds..', p. 23.

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