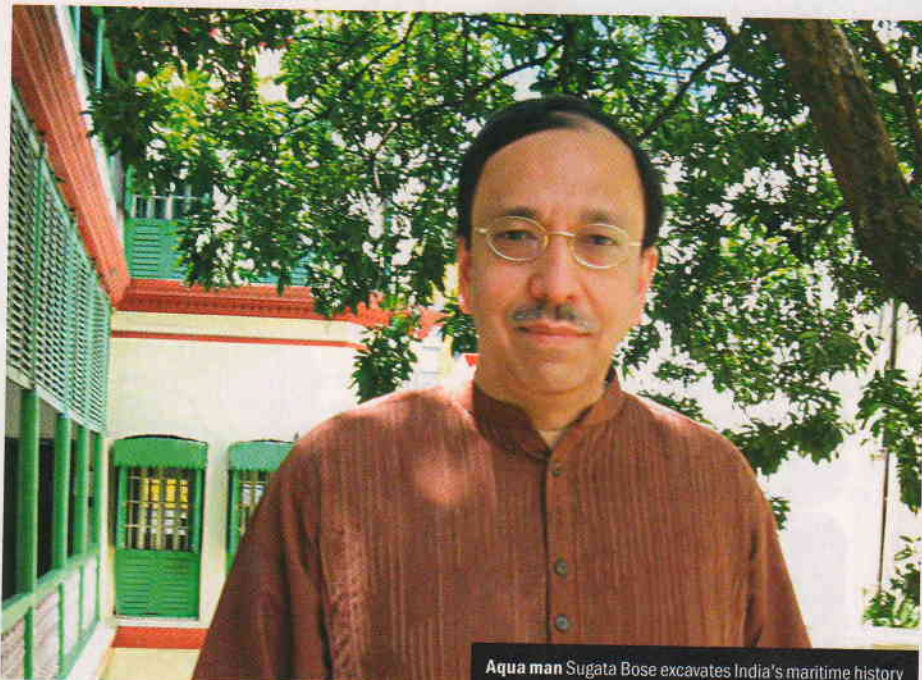


# Water world

The Indian Ocean provides a “connective canvas” for writing India’s history, Harvard historian Sugata Bose tells **Vaishnavi Chandrashekhar**.



Aqua man Sugata Bose excavates India’s maritime history

**T**hrough the accident of geography and the purposiveness of commerce, India’s connection with the countries of the Indian Ocean – from South Africa to Singapore – is both old and deep. Yet relatively little has been written about this relationship. In the past decade, scholars have begun to rediscover the maritime history of trade and migration in the Indian Ocean, even as India’s business interests in the region have grown.

Foremost among the excavators is Sugata Bose, Gardiner Professor of Oceanic History and Affairs at Harvard University and the grandnephew of Subhas Chandra Bose, the revolutionary who fired up Indians against the British Empire. The influential historian, also chairs the state government-appointed group to help rejuvenate his alma mater, Presidency College in Kolkata.

This fortnight, Bose will talk about “Colourful Cosmopolitanisms: Bombay, Calcutta and the Indian Ocean” for the 15th Vasant J Sheth Memorial Lecture. Excerpts from an email interview:

**The Indian Ocean has recently attracted the attention of both historians like yourself and novelists like Amitav Ghosh. But maritime connections barely register with most Indians. Why is the Indian Ocean largely absent from our idea of India?**

Since 1947, we seem to have privileged territorial nationalism and, of course, our political centre has been located deep in the

interior of our sub-continental landmass. Yet India has a long coastline and a rich history of being the hub of an expansive network of Indian Ocean trade and migration. I hope recent imaginative literary works of fiction and non-fiction will help redefine our idea of India and place our country in a larger Indian Ocean and global context. When Tagore travelled by sea to South East Asia in 1927, he was embarking on a journey to retrace the footprints of India’s entry into the universal.

**Much of your work has been in labour and political history. How did you become interested in the Indian Ocean?**

Anyone interested in labour history cannot ignore the large-scale movement of Indian indentured labourers to sugar and rubber plantations in various Indian Ocean locations and beyond after the formal end of slavery in the 1830s. If one reflects on the modern history of empire, it becomes clear that the British initially ruled their outposts in the Middle East and East Africa from Bombay and their territories in South East Asia from Calcutta. The history of Indian anti-colonial nationalism also had extra-territorial dimensions. We simply need to remember Gandhi’s satyagraha campaigns in South Africa or Subhas Chandra Bose’s armed struggle in South East Asia. I felt the Indian Ocean supplied a vital comparative and connective canvas for writing Indian history in an innovative way

**One associates the age of Indian Ocean trade with the eighteenth century. You have shown that Indian merchants and labour circulated from Mombasa to Mandalay until the 1930s. Why did that era finally end?**

Most Indian Ocean historians have concentrated on the millennium stretching from the rise of Islam to the eighteenth century. There was a mistaken assumption that with the onset of European imperial domination the old organic unity of the Indian Ocean world was sundered. Even though key qualitative changes did take place in the eighteenth century, I have shown in my work the relevance and resilience of the Indian Ocean space in modern times. It was an inter-regional arena characterised by specialised flows of capital and labour, skills and services, ideas and culture. The era of circulation and connection never quite ended, but was certainly interrupted for about half a century since the 1940s during the heyday of the European model of the territorial nation-state in Asia. The earlier links are now being rediscovered and restored.

**What was Mumbai’s relationship to its maritime frontier? How was it different from Kolkata?**

Mumbai and Kolkata were both simultaneously colonial cities and Indian Ocean port cities in the modern era. After the mid-nineteenth century Mumbai emerged as a much stronger and dynamic venue of indigenous capitalism than Kolkata. However, even Bombay-based merchants and financiers were largely limited to the Indian Ocean and hit an invisible glass ceiling in the capitalist architecture until independence. No capitalist from Bombay, excepting the Sassoons, were able to break into the lofty domains of high finance and industry in the West until the late twentieth century.

**Indian and Chinese firms are now flooding East Africa and South East Asia. How do you see India’s future role in the region?**

There will inevitably be a measure of strategic and economic rivalry between India and China in the Indian Ocean arena. China currently has an edge in those domains. However, the Indian Ocean also represents a cultural ecumene and India may have a distinct advantage if it deploys its “soft power” subtly and intelligently. The future of the Indian Ocean will depend a great deal on the ability of India and China to peacefully manage their simultaneous rise.

*Sugata Bose will deliver the 15th Vasant J Sheth Memorial Lecture on Thur Jan 10. See page 56 in Around Town.*