

“The Arabian Seas: The Indian Ocean World of the Seventeenth Century”

RJ Barendse (Vision, New Delhi, 2004)

(pages 588+ xvi, paperback, Rs.595)

Even the back-cover blurb ‘magisterial’ seems inadequate for a book that is so fresh and sweeping perspective it presents. We are accustomed to the viewing the world in neat boxes, South Asia, the Gulf, SE Asia and the like. Do we realize that at the edge of the Bay of Bengal, the land territories of India and Indonesia are separated by a mere 100 kilometers! This book bridges our fragmented perspectives of Africa, the Gulf and much of Asia, into an integrated view where India is a natural center and pivot. Barendse vividly calls the Arabian seas an ‘ethnosphere’, the core of the world economy of 17th century, where the Monsoon propelled the encounters of trade and politics.

The book is not a traditional history but a social anthropology of the entire region and its encounters with the Portuguese, Dutch and the East India Companies, besides the French, focused on the 17th century Indian Ocean, when no European power was paramount. The author started with a doctoral thesis in his Dutch homeland, and refined it over the next 15 years. Barendse’s strength is that he has used primary sources, delving into Dutch and other European archives, plus extensive ground research across this entire region, including our National Archives and the Indian Institute of Historical Research, and documentation centers in Panjim and Bicholim. Such research is expensive, and demands unique language expertise.

The author begins with a sketch of the rim-lands of the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, from Madagascar and Mozambique through the Gulf to the Southern tip of India, with its checkerboard of local rulers and the traders traversing the ocean. He describes the interplay between the contesting Europeans, and then goes on to their commercial and political diplomacy with the princes and the native merchants. He evokes the atmosphere of the *natios*, the enclaves of separate jurisdiction where Europeans lived and clashed, often on religious divides, between the Catholic French and Portuguese on the one side, and the Protestant Danish, Dutch and English on the other. There were also the various

native *nations*. He observes that the women in Asia and Africa were the ‘caryatids of empire’. He examines the social mores of these Europeans long separated from their women, sometimes receiving shiploads of ‘orphans of the king’, virgin maidens or otherwise. The ‘freebooters’ are described, the Europeans that came to make their fortunes in these frontier zones, as also the problem of desertions among the motley troops and sailors, and the mutual poaching for manpower among the Europeans.

A disappointingly short chapter addresses the interactions between the Europeans and the native rulers. Might was essentially right, and the Europeans followed the legal axiom, ‘no peace beyond the line’, since communications to the East Indies were poor and news of alliances in Europe might take a year to reach the territories in which these rival trading companies operated with sovereign impunity. The author’s focus is not a history of chronology, but a portrait of the different kinds of European-local encounters, and the issues this raised, in the eyes of the actors of the time, ranging from the legality of evidence tendered across cultures, to corruption and other malpractices.

He gives a fascinating account of how local polities dealt with the European traders. One chapter covers the world of the native merchants and their markets, and another narrates the ebb and flow of trade across this mega-zone, where the original source-based analysis is at its best. The account of the trade in indigo and textiles in India, for instance, is gripping, as is the story of bullion inflow from Europe into India, which he calls ‘the bottomless sink’. The penultimate chapter looks at the interconnections that emerged by 1700 in colonial commerce with the ‘two Indies’, East and West, which the author rightly says is ignored by academics who study the world in compartments.

A shortcoming of the work is that it is a micro-level study, missing the unifying sweep of an overview, but it could be that the author’s has chosen not to generalize, when the ground reality was one of multiple contestation and diversity. In this respect the work provides a counterpoint to the study by the Australian, K. McPherson: *The Indian Ocean: A History of the People and the Sea* (OUP, New Delhi, 1994), which spans the entire

historical record of the magnificence that was the Indian Ocean civilization. But that book lacks the authority of a primary record.

Barendse underscores the predominance of Asia in the world economy on the eve of its political colonization. He is an empathic observer of a world that was about to go into eclipse, under the onslaught of alien powers whose trading instincts would produce Empire and enslavement of both peoples and cultures. Barendse concludes that in this vast region ‘the central authorities were often not really that concerned with what was happening along the coast’, a cleavage between those ruling the kingdoms and the merchants along its seashore. The book ends with a query that is not really answered — why did these states do so little to prevent what became for them the start of disaster? Barendse points out that the great merchants and bankers that traded with the Companies could be more easily taxed than caravan merchants, and thus the Mughal Empire and the other rulers benefited from commerce with Europe. The larger issue is surely that shifting Europe-Asia balance of power, technology and ambition made that outcome inevitable.

Kishan S Rana