

Oceanic Destiny- II

The Statesman

January 30 2017

In his book “Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and Future of American Power”, the American author Robert Kaplan had argued that the geopolitics of the twenty-first century will be decided by events in the Indian Ocean rim which is emerging as the new geopolitical centre of the world. Kaplan’s narrative rests on the premise that Indian Ocean’s regular monsoon winds, which carried traders across the ocean since antiquity had established cultural and economic patterns which are still very much in action. There has been little research conducted so far on issues relating to security, stability and sustainability of the Indian Ocean Region and its future potential from the geopolitical and strategic perspectives of 21st century. The concept of proactively promoting and engaging in a broader Indian Ocean grouping still lies at the periphery of our national objectives and geopolitical goals, ignoring the advantages conferred upon us by history. We are still unmindful of what Nelson Mandela had prophetically said in 1995, “The natural urge of the facts of history and geography should broaden itself to include the concept of an Indian Ocean Rim for socio-economic co-operation and other peaceful endeavours.”

One of the earliest works on the subject, “*Histoire ancienne des états hindouisés d’Extrême Orient*” published in 1944 (translated as “The Indianised States of Southeast Asia”) by the French archeologist George Cœdès explores the dharma-dhamma continuum evidenced even today in the thousands of Hindu-Buddha temples in practically all over South East Asia - Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar. India’s relations with these countries date back at least to 1st millennium AD or even earlier; even countries on the eastern and southern coast of Africa and in the middle-east share thousands of years of close socio-cultural interaction through maritime trade links with India.

In 1947, K M Panikkar had observed, “Millenniums before Columbus sailed the Atlantic and Magellan crossed the Pacific, the Indian Ocean had become a thoroughfare of commercial and cultural traffic.” That was one of the earliest globalisations on record. Sanjeev Sanyal, in his book “Ocean of Churn”, had mentioned that middle east and Iran had trade links with the Indus valley people since the Harappan times, that the merchant ships from Gurjrat used to sail along the Makran coast trading along the way, past Gwador and Sutkajen-dor (now near the Iran- Pakistan border). Discovery of Harappan artifacts and seals as far as Southern Iran suggests a continuum of economic and cultural trails all along. The trail survived even in the modern times - till 1960s, Indian rupee was legal tender in most Middle-East countries including Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and UAE; they resorted to their own currencies only after the sharp devaluation of the rupee by the RBI in 1966. The supreme living trail is of course the hundreds of thousands of Indians who live and work in the Gulf countries in the Middle East, especially from the south – reminder of a vibrant ancient connection when hundreds Arab merchants used to flock to the Malabar and Kerala coasts in the course of maritime trade.

Sanyal narrated how seafarers from Odisha and Bengal had started visiting Sri Lanka from the sixth century BC. The first Indianized kingdom emerged in Vitetnam’s Mekong delta around 1st Century BC, established, according to legend, by a Brahmin named Kaundinya, to whom both the Chams of

Vietnam as well as Khmers of Cambodia trace their ancestry. By then, Indian mariners had learnt enough about monsoon winds and ocean currents to follow the north eastern monsoon to sail to Sri Lanka in mid-November, an event that is still commemorated in Odisha on the day of Kartik Purnima when ladies place paperboats with lighted diyas on waterbodies, a distant reminder of the times when their menfolks would sail away leaving them to take care of their homes for months. After replenishing the fresh water and provisions in Sri Lanka, mariners would set sail again in January, following ocean currents to Sumatra, then known as Swarnadwipa, and from there, to continue their voyage past the Malacca Strait on to Malay Peninsula, Borneo and Vietnam, or southward along the western coast of Java, then known as Jabadwipa, on to Bali. After trading for two months, by mid-March, they would start their return journey to reach Sri Lanka in time to catch the south-west monsoon that would take them back to home.

With more knowledge about ocean currents and monsoon winds, Indian seafarers became more adventurous. They sailed not only from Odisha and Bengal, but also from Andhra and Tamilnadu. Cotton was the most important export, and Indian cotton carried the seeds of Indian culture, language and religion into the lands of South East Asia. Hinduism and Buddhism spread within a few centuries, and Mahabharata and Ramayana struck deep roots along with Sanskrit in the soil of South East Asia, which have survived the onslaught of Islam and colonial rule by the Portugese, the Dutch and the British till today. Hinduism is still dominant in Bali and Buddhism in Myanmar. The ninth century Buddhist temple of Borobudur and the 10th century Hindu temples of Prambanan in Indonesia and the 12th century Hindu temple of Angkor in Cambodia still attract millions of tourists from all over. The Indian links are remembered with a great deal of warmth, and I have myself experienced extraordinary affection in these lands just because I happen to hail from India.

The Hindu Srivijaya dynasty in Sumatra and Malay Peninsula (7th-13th centuries), Angkor (Khmer) in Cambodia (9th-15th centuries), Majapahit in Java (13th-16th centuries) and Kingdom of Champa in Central and Southern Vietnam (2nd-17th centuries) remained enduring powers in the region, before the gradual spread of Islam from 14th Century onwards and then colonisation by Europeans would eclipse their glory.

Along the west coast of India also, merchant fleets from Arabia negotiated the waters of the Arabian Sea, sailing south hugging the western coast of India, past Saurashtra and Gulf of Khambhat, through the estuary of Narmada to the modern port of Bharuch, then Barygaza. The Arab merchants would reach the shores of Kerala within a few centuries. It was following this route that groups of Christians and Parsis fleeing persecution in Iran would reach India, making it their home for ever.

It is indeed paradoxical how the adventurous, seafaring people of India gradually turned inward-looking and lost their strength before succumbing easily to foreign invasions, and how even crossing the sea (*Kalapani*) became stigmatized in society. In his seminal work, "The influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783", American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan had argued that control over the seas is essential for national greatness. History of colonisation of Asia, Africa and Americas by European powers seem to vindicate much of Mahan's thesis. Seas provide excellent means for communication and exchange between nations, and an enemy can be neutralised by barring it from the use of sea. Mahan's theory can be viewed in the perspective of current reinforcement naval power in the Indian Ocean by India, China and USA. A strong navy that can bolster commercial interests,

protect trade and control the strategic checkpoints would be the key elements in any race for supremacy of power in the Indian Ocean region, a region that will become the epicentre of global power-play in the twenty-first century.

“Project ‘Mausam’: Maritime Routes and Cultural Landscapes” was launched as a transnational project by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India in 2014, to rekindle the long-lost ties across nations of the Indian Ocean-world and to forge new avenues of cooperation and exchange. The project, launched by India in partnership with member states, will enable a significant step in recording and celebrating this important phase of world history from the African, Arab and Asian-world perspectives. But to regenerate the economic links is even more important, and a sustainable way to achieve this is through the “Blue Economy”.

Gunter Pauli's 2010 book, "The Blue Economy: 10 years, 100 innovations, 100 million jobs" promises to “shift society from scarcity to abundance ‘with what is locally available’, by tackling issues that cause environmental and related problems in new ways”. It relies on the design of sustainable systems to fuel "blue growth" which addresses the problems of resource scarcity and waste disposal, while focusing on sustainable development in a holistic manner. Blue Economy holds immense promise for the Indian Ocean region which has a treasure of vast untapped natural resources. Development Blue Economy in the Indian Ocean region has the potential to offer many benefits, from utilising the untapped marine and mineral resources of the Indian Ocean to interconnecting, boosting and synergising the coastal national economies of the region. It can also revive the IORARC as an Ocean-based, close-knit and vibrant community. In fact, IORARC has already adopted the Blue Economy as a top priority, and identified eight priority areas for cooperation between the member states including fisheries and aquaculture, renewable ocean energy, seaports and shipping, seabed exploration for minerals etc. One only hopes that the ideas are translated into actions, because like in the past, what happens in the Indian Ocean now will determine the course of human history once again.