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Indian Council of World Affairs
Sapru House, Barakhamba Road
New Delhi

ICWA Sponsored

Event Report

of the
International Conference

on

“New Directions in Indian Ocean Studies “

at

OUCIP, Osmania University

Feb 26-28 2015

The Osmania University Centre for International Programmes-OUCIP organized an international conference in collaboration with the Indian Council of World Affairs –ICWA- New Delhi on “New Directions in Indian Ocean Studies” from Feb.26-28 2015.

The OUCIP was established to promote innovative knowledge and discourses and to create a community of scholars committed to that goal.

To that end OUCIP organized an international conference on what is new and innovative in Indian Ocean Studies in the last week of February 2015.

The conference was organized to respond to the increasing concerns for environment, climate change, natural calamities and bio diversity, in different disciplines leading to a move towards Ocean Studies. It was felt that this turn towards the Oceanic turn in Sciences and Humanities was critical in shaping a new world order in 21st century.

The deliberations at the Conference reflected the emerging consensus that Indian Ocean Studies can no longer be considered as belonging to any specific discipline. It was felt that its range and the relevance merits it to be considered as a discipline by itself with space of interconnecting research and readings ranging from Archeology, History and Geography to Humanities, International Relations, Security, Sociology, and Anthropology dealing with a scientific understanding of the constructs of the Indian Ocean.

The conference also reflected the recent upsurge in Indian Ocean Studies. That the Indian Ocean Studies has moved beyond its traditional ‘marginal status’ to a global discourse involving Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities was obvious in the conference proceedings. The primary objective of this conference was to bring together scholars who are working in this field to share, and to have a critical look at this new body of knowledge. And also to review the Oceanic transactions in different segments of India’s interaction with the world and world’s presence in the littorals of the Indian Ocean—a theme that has also been receiving the attention of the policy makers, not just in India but also in the other littoral states.

The planning and the organization of this event was indeed fortuitous as it coincided with the series of programmes launched all over India under the aegis of the Project Mausam of the Ministry of Culture Govt. of India. While this proximity enhanced the importance of the event for OUCIP, it also deprived the OUCIP event of some of the scholars who could not manage their time between the ongoing series of the project and the OUCIP event. OUCIP also lost to the Budget session of Parliament of India where some of our special guests were required to be present as part of their national obligations.

While the timing of the conference was largely determined by the financial procedures of the Institution, it also kept some of the younger academics away from the event. Despite submitting their proposals, they could not be physically present at the event as they were preoccupied with the finishing the courses and the ensuing examination duties.

The scope of the conference was open to all disciplines, but expected emphasis was on the new and the innovative, even in what would be considered traditional.

Some of the suggested areas mentioned in the CFP were:-

New Research in Indian Ocean History: Roots and Routes

The Indian Ocean and India's Regional Histories.

Science and Technology

Power Dynamics _Old and New

Indian Ocean: Myth, Folklore and Literature

Forms of Culture, Cuisine and Arts

Indian Ocean and Coastal Communities

Climate Change, Survival and Indian Ocean Heritage

Indian Ocean's Contribution to Science and Technology.

The participants included scholars from Archeology, History, International Relations, Strategic Studies, Economics, Environmental Studies, Literature and Culture, Sports, and Science and Technology. The conference was inaugurated by Ambassador Rajiv K. Bhatia ,

Director General of the Indian Council of World Affairs-ICWA_ New Delhi, who set the tone and the tenor of the three days proceedings in his address. While elaborating on the Indian perspectives of Indian Ocean Amb. Bhatia mentioned the three significant events that the ICWA hosted relating to the Indian Ocean Studies..These being the March 2013 conference on "Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific Region: Asian Perspectives", the September 2013 initiative on Trilateral Dialogue on Indian Ocean, and the third being the participation of the ICWA in the first meeting of the Indian Ocean Dialogue initiated by the MEA. The Ambassador pointed out that the Indian Ocean has been at the centre of some of the oldest civilizations and indeed of recorded history The power shifts from the west to east have added to the increased salience of the Indian Ocean .Elaborating further he highlighted three important developments: collaboration cum competition defining the role of India, China and the US in Indian Ocean, India's response to the new initiatives by China such as BCIM Economic Corridor, and thirdly , the initiatives taken by India in recent times to connect with the Indian Ocean neighbours. He wondered whether the conference would probe the strategic dimensions of the project Mausam -essentially a soft power project-

The key note was delivered by Professor Susanta Goonatilake, the eminent intellectual from Sri Lanka , presently the President of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka , author of many books including, Crippled Minds : Explorations into Colonial Culture, Aborted Discovery: Science and Creativity in the Third world, Toward a Global Science: Mining Civilization Knowledge, Technological Independence: The Asian Experience' Speaking on "Cultural Dynamics of the Indian Ocean in the Past and the Future" Professor Goonatilake drew the attention of the participants to the tectonic shifts taking place in the Indian Ocean region as it becomes the centre of gravity in economics , politics and the social returns to Asia after a period of 200 to 300 years of European hegemony.

He felt that this will have repercussions also in the realms of culture and knowledge, including in science and technology. He pointed out how the efforts of the Asiatic Society established in 1784 to translate the classical literatures written in Arabic ,Pali and Sanskrit into English, were largely over-shadowed by the mindset of Macaulay that was

made during the initial industrial revolution in Britain which presumed the primacy of intellectual trajectory emanating from Greece.

Elaborating on the transfer of knowledge from the Indian Ocean region to Europe, he identified the many directions in which the shifts are taking place in our times like Economics, Technology, Literature and in the many branches of Science and in Philosophy.

Retaining the multi-disciplinary character of the conference the sessions and the special lectures reflected the rooting of the different disciplines into the study of the Indian Ocean. Sessions were devoted to History and Archaeology, Science and Technology, Environment and Climate Change, Coastal Communities Indigenous People and Small Islands, Security Concerns in the Indian Ocean Region, Old and New Challenges, Diasporic Communities in the Indian Ocean Region, Literature, Culture and Recreation, and a concluding session entitled 'Towards Future.

Apart from these sessions special lectures were planned before every session. The first special lecture focused on how Archaeology, History, Geology Geography, Politics Religion and Policy find space in the discourse on Indian Ocean. Drawing from the controversies emanating from the discourses of Science ,Geography ,Development, Belief , Secularism ,Policy and Politics Prof. Y Vaikuntam in his lecture "Sethu Samudram :Archaeology, History and Policy 'enlightened the participants about the issues involved in the proposed project of Sethu Samudram, envisaged to reduce the travel time of the vessels traversing from the western to the eastern Indian Ocean.

In his lecture this Prof Vaikunatm emphasized how a public policy conceived and crafted in land locked cities cannot afford to ignore the realities of an Oceanic project involving Geography, Geology Development, Faith and Belief as well as the subtle nuances involved in crafting a relationship with nearest neighbours across the Ocean. He emphasized that given the extant of the destruction that is likely to be caused to the ecology, and fauna and flora of the Ocean, the livelihood of the lakhs of fishermen both in southern India and northern Sri Lannka and the potential exploitation of the issue by the groups interested in fanning religious controversies , it would be prudent for any government in Delhi to look

for policy alternatives to deal with the issue. Among other considerations the specific policy option will also have to be cognizant of the revenues accruing to a friendly neighbor through the 'religious' tourism in their own country.

The second special lecture was delivered by Dr. Christian Bouchard who brought the attention of the participants to the importance of smaller islands in the Indian Ocean. From the ancient Persians' a Arabs' links with Pemba and Zanzibar on the east African coast, to the more recent projections of American power in Diego Garcia and the ventures of other European powers into the Indian Ocean, Prof Bouchard pointed out that the access and control of these small island is of great significance not just for geostrategic considerations but also in rediscovering, forging and strengthening cultural and historical links with the Island communities- a fact that has been recently proved by some of the visits made by the Indian Prime minister recently.

He maintained that military presence in these islands has been enhanced of late in conjunction with the growing importance of the Indian Ocean region. This is certainly true of the Diego Garcia in the Chagos Archipelago, of as well as India and its island territories of Andaman, Nicobar and Lakshadweep, and also for France in the Reunion. He also surveyed other islands that are now being integrated into the strategic planning of other countries like Seychelles, Mauritius, Maldives Oman's Masirah Island, Yemen's Socotra, Australia's \ Cocos (Keeling) Islands and perhaps Burma's Coco Islands. .

He elaborated on how India, the US France and Australia are securing and even developing their positions in the Indian Ocean small islands while China and perhaps others, are seeking to establish new facilities in the region.

Comodr. Uday Bhasker in his special lecture 'India China and the US in the Indian Ocean' pointed out the implications of China's offers of help to Sri Lanka in recent times, in forging a maritime strategy for India. The offer to develop the Colombo port may be considered a first step towards a more invasive presence of China in the Southern Indian Ocean. He emphasized the need for India to consider the MSR-The Maritime Silk route- more objectively, as opting out of it might isolate India in the future multilateral arrangements

for cooperation in the region. On the other hand, India's participation in this could be an effective maritime supplement to BCIM-Bangladesh, China, India Myanmar- and The Sagarmata project of India could contribute to the sea trade connectivity and also provide a port led development of the hinterland.

Regarding the US presence and policies in the Indian Ocean, Comodr. Bhasker felt that the three countries –India China and the US- can play a constructive role in the Indian ocean avoiding what he called a 'Trilemma' .This will depend on finding answers to the following questions:-

Are the US, Chinese and the Indian national interests in accord with regional expectations of their role? What role does each country expects to play in the region? To what extent the Chinese and the Indian domestic political constraints, capability constraints, , and developmental priorities hinder cooperation ?

iii) How and in what way greater maritime profile of India and China would undermine or reinforce the 'rebalancing" posture of the US?

iv) What patterns of US forms of cooperation, and competition are appearing between the new maritime powers such as South Korea, or Indonesia and between these states and the established maritime powers such as US Japan and Australia?

Mohan Guruswamy brought to the fore his knowledge and understanding of the intricacies of economic development in the Indian Ocean region situating India's achievements at the centre. In a presentation titled 'The Centrality of the IOR to India's Being' Mohan Guruswami skillfully traced the movements of the forces that determined world politics through ages via the Indian Ocean.

Tracing the use of Indian ocean throughout history for the purposes of Trade, , Slavery , and Seafaring Guruswami highlighted the significance of Indian Ocean in the Petroleum age. He pointed out how the IO serves as not just the lifeline for India but also as its life blood. He elaborated upon the fact that more than any other Ocean, IO remains the

hub of the economic activities of not just India but of the whole world. Detailing the efforts of India and China to maintain a position of equilibrium, he discussed the quantum of exports and imports of India through the IO and pointed out the significance of the sea lanes and the need to keep these safe and peaceful.

He ruled out the possibility of the mutual competition culminating into an open conflict between India and China due to three factors: the realization in both countries that stability of the global system would be a vital national interest for both the countries, the weight of the age old traditions of a belief in peace and tranquility, and lastly a belief in the adage “maintenance of a good navy as a guaranty of Peace”.

Lakshmi Subramanian in her presentation titled “India and the Indian Ocean: Old Concerns , New Perspectives’ identified some of the concerns of the concerns of Indian Ocean Studies and how these are being revisited in recent times .She elaborated upon the essentially inter-disciplinary nature of the Indian Ocean Studies in which the notions of diaspora, nation and empire are re- figured .She also attempted a genealogy of the Indian ocean historiography tracking some of the more visible elements and locating them within a political context. She interrogated Eurocentricism in the wake of nationalist recovery of Asian enterprise and emphasized the need for a more rigorous appreciation of commodity culture, and thereafter, by a re- evaluation of Empire itself through the lens of law, citizenship, and subjectivity.

Aparajita Biswas in her presentation covered the significance of the Indian diaspora – a theme that figures prominently in the visits of the Indian prime minister in recent times to several countries. She held the opinion that the Indian Diaspora has been a major source of the projection of the soft power of India and that there is a need to further consolidate and reinvigorate their role in the projection of India’s soft power.

Focusing on the Francophone Africa in the Western Indian Ocean States like Mauritius, Reunion and Seychelles, she also included in her analysis the role of the Indian Diaspora in Benin, Cameroon, Ivory Coast ,Chad Senegal, Mali Djibouti and Algeria. Though a minority in their respective states, except in Mauritius, the Indian diasporic communities have been

active participants in developing the economies of their adopted home countries – the recent emphasis on trade, technology and investment has been amply used by these communities to the advantage of India as well as their adopted homes.

Two major presentations came from the members of the Indian diasporic community in Mauritius.

Representing the turf of Humanities in the Indian Ocean Studies, Professor Sooshilla Goppaul felt that careful crafting in epic writing and sensitive reading can be most valuable in creating new directions for future diasporic generations and populations. While elaborating this she also cautioned that perpetually renewed celebrations of the past could also be a subtle form of manipulation, indicating the route to the roots could be an indirect way of creating a glass ceiling. She underlined the importance of the writings of epic culture as these serve as the major collective cultural points of reference and epistemology.

The trend towards the creation of cultural epics she felt, is the result of the need to create a cultural hinterland -janus-faced – as the people of Diaspora are, they turn naturally towards past which holds an ever opened space of material for writers.

The recent display by the Indian diasporic communities of the love for the land of their birth -despite being crucial actors in the development of their new country - during the visits of Mr. Modi to different countries amply substantiates this view of Gopaul.

The next paper from a diasporic Indian based in Reunion came from Soocramanien Vithilingem who began with Sushma Swaraj's statement about the dearth of studies on the Indian diaspora in Indian Ocean during her visit to Mauritius.

He began by pointing out that compared to the Indian diaspora in north America, the UK, and Australia, the Indian diaspora in the smaller islands of the Indian ocean has received scant attention by the successive governments of India. It is only recently that the Indian government has given a priority to the people of Indian origin in these islands. Detailing the composition of the Indian diaspora in three major Island nations viz Mauritius,

Seychelles and Reunion Mr Vithilingem pointed out that while the Indian diasporic community forms a majority in Mauritius with visible representation in politics, business education and so on, the situation is not very encouraging in Seychelles and Reunion. He held the opinion that in Seychelles due to its recent dictatorial past a process of integration and assimilation was initiated that discouraged all forms of religious assertions. However things began to change recently where places of worship have been permitted, and participation in religio-cultural activities has commenced. In Reunion there is a sizeable Hindu community whose forefathers were brought to the sugar plantations from the French occupied Pondicherry and Karaikal.

His major suggestion was that the Indian government should consider roping in the Indian Ocean Commission and the India Ocean Rim countries to facilitate research projects and regular interaction between scholars of the Indian Ocean. Serious research however will require staying for some time in the midst of Indian diaspora in these three countries and obtaining first hand information from their members about their aspirations and problems they face. All this would require assistance in some form or the other. He also mentioned that due to his familiarity with Seychelles where he worked, and Reunion where he led some of the delegations of the people of Indian origin, his participation and guidance would be available to anyone who would venture in this direction.

Moving from Diaspora to literature Prof RS Sharma made a presentation on "Amitav Ghosh, Indian Ocean and the New Thassology". He pointed out that Amitav Ghosh, through his writings has not only extended the boundaries of the Indian writings in English but has also anticipated much that is seen as the new Thassology-a turn towards Humanities in Indian Ocean Studies. What distinguishes Amitav Ghosh from others, he felt, was the human drama played around and in the Indian Ocean, the interplay between its past and present and the role language and history play in the lives of people who are struggling to come to terms with what they have inherited from the Ocean and what they hope to find as they look into the future. He elaborated this through a detailed discussion of Ghosh's "The Slave of MS H6" which foregrounds much that he has written later and which enables him to locate his writings in the inter regional space of the Indian Ocean.

Professor Rui Kohiyama presented a paper on 'From the Indian Ocean to the Pacific: Missinary Summer Resorts in Asia'. She began by pointing out that not much has been said about the connection between India and Japan probably because of the distance as well as the conceptual division between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans. Yet long before the current globalization, the two countries or regions shared contemporaneity. People, goods and information were conveyed to and fro over the Indian and Pacific oceans for long period of time. In modern period western missionaries as well the colonists and adventurers were important agents who made such connections. The colonist and the Missionaries in Asia created several summer resorts in highlands to escape the hot and humid weathers of Asia. In her paper she surveyed the geographical distribution of the highland summer resorts in Asia picking examples of missionary summer resort communities in India and China, and threw light on some of their characteristics compared to the more secular ones like Simla and Ootacomand. Then she moved on to discuss in detail the major missionary summer resort in of Karuizawa in Japan. In doing so she elaborated upon the influence of Christian Missions that eventually led to westernization and culminated in modern consumer cultures.

Papers were presented under different sessions by scholars drawn from universities in India and also from Mauritius, Srilanka, Bangladesh, Japan, and Canada.

The special session devoted to Science and Technology and Climate Change, had scientists representing the premier institutions devoted to Oceanic research like National Institute of Oceanography, Goa, and Indian Institute of tropical Meteorology, Pune. Apart from papers presented on different themes the conference had a set of special lectures delivered on the different themes projected at the Conference, which set the terms of discourse at the different sessions. Adding to the current flavor for Indians' love for the game Joe Christopher delivered his talk on Cricket in the Indian Ocean World.

The concluding session had an inspiring lecture by Mr. Muntasir Mamun, special assistant to the Bangladesh High Commissioner, New Delhi, who presented a new vision of regional collaboration in his lecture From Roots to Routes: Towards a new paradigm of Inclusive prosperity in Bangladesh, India and China.

The Conference concluded with an open session at which Professor Kousar J.Azam the convenor of the Conference, invited responses from all the participants. It was observed at this session that a time has come to look at the Indian Ocean Studies as an independent discipline ,providing space for research reading and inter connectivity from the varied fields of knowledge as was evident in different presentations. It was also felt that setting up an independent Ministry for Indian Ocean Affairs would provide the necessary fillip to research and review not just the political and economic connections but also help provide a backdrop of cultural , anthropological sociological and religious interactions, that could encourage new approaches, sustain present research and promote fresh incentives in understanding the importance of Indian Ocean to “India’s being.” .The conference concluded with a valedictory by the director OUCIP Prof A .Karunakar.
