



Image credit: Jehangir Sorabjee

Part 1

The World Comes to Mumbai

Mumbai's position astride the shipping routes, linking West (Persian Gulf, Red Sea, East and South Africa, West Africa, Europe, the Americas), South (Mauritius and Sri Lanka) and East (S.E. Asia, Philippines, Australia, China and Japan), has brought it great prosperity over the last 300 years. The opening article of this section, *The Sea and Civilisation: Origins of a globalised world*, is based on a conversation with American writer Lincoln Paine on how the seas are the highways of the oceans, which carry with them not just goods but capital, labour, contagions, ideas, cultures and religions.

Great port cities like Mumbai are the major junctions on these oceanic highways, and thus the places where trade occurs. *Breaking the ice: U.S. trade with Bombay*, which traces the beginnings of the American ice trade that was to become a lucrative global business in the 1850s, is a case study.

Ports also are where ocean travellers meet and interact. In 1889 a visit to Mumbai by the personal envoy of the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamit II, the spiritual head of the Muslim world, had an electrifying effect on the city's Muslim communities and made the island part of a pioneering diplomatic mission to Japan, a voyage that was retraced 125 years later by the Turkish naval frigate TCG Gediz. This theme of overseas influences is woven into articles in this section.

The Sea And Civilisation: Origins of a globalised world

Gateway House co-hosted a panel discussion on the influence of the sea on civilisation and globalisation over a period of 10,000 years, and the linkage between two ancient civilisations — the Indus Valley and Mesopotamian.

Maritime history teaches us that history is not ‘event-based’. In fact, when viewed from the sea, history reveals ‘linkages’ and ‘circulations’ between geographical regions that one never knew existed.

One of several examples that were discussed at a recent panel discussion, hosted by Gateway House along with Avid Learning and the U.S. Consulate in Mumbai, was the linkage between two contemporaneous ancient civilisations — the Indus Valley and the Mesopotamian. The former was based in the valley of the Indus river and its tributaries,

and the latter in that of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (in present-day Iraq).

Both these civilisations were urban societies that prospered due to the annual flooding of the rivers that resulted in rich alluvial silt being deposited on their banks: this made agriculture flourish. However, most would not be aware that there was an active sea trade between both these complex urban civilisations that extended from the mouth of the River Indus to the Persian Gulf.

These sea routes that date back over 5,000 years are the earliest known maritime trade routes in the Indian Ocean.

In further reiterating the importance of the seas (including rivers) as conduits for trade, migrations, culture, religion, contagion, explorations and conquest, maritime historian Lincoln Paine spoke about the voyages of the Norsemen (Vikings) from the Scandinavian countries of present-day Sweden, Denmark and Norway.

Sometime during 700 CE to 1100 CE, the Vikings travelled on the mighty rivers of Europe (then unexplored) that resulted in connecting the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. This brought them into contact with people from the Eurasian landmass and with the trading worlds of the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean.

However, the best preserved written records of maritime trade in the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean (stretching from the Coast of East Africa to South East Asia), are the Cairo Genizah Records. These are letters written by seafaring Jewish merchants from

900 CE to 1800 CE, which survived the vagaries of time largely because they were kept in a *genizah* (a store room in a Jewish synagogue).

These Hebrew letters, written in Judaeo-Arabic, exemplified a very cosmopolitan and global world of seafarers, merchants and mendicants, who travelled across the seas to port cities of the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. More importantly, the early letters throw light on the medieval port cities of India (like Mangalore) and the lives of these merchants on the subcontinent.

The fact that the language used in these letters is Hebrew, but written in the Judaeo-Arabic script, highlights the inherent cosmopolitanism of a seafaring world.

Taking this point further, cultural theorist, Ranjit Hoskote brought in the idea of cosmopolitanism vis-a-vis 'cultural interiority' (or boundaries prescribed by religion and community), and how merchants had to draw a fine balance between the two.



BOMBAY FORT FROM THE HARBOUR. 1665-1700.

This image is a view from the harbour of the custom house and bunder (pier), and to its left are the walls and flag-staff of the Bombay Fort. Behind the custom house is the bell-tower of the St. Thomas Cathedral, the first Anglican church in the city. The island city's expansive, sheltered harbour was chiefly responsible for the commercial success of its port, foreign trade, and the growth of its navy – the erstwhile Bombay Marine (headquartered in the city since 1687), the progenitor of the Indian Navy's Western Fleet. Image credit: Jehangir Sorabjee

For example, the legendary Bombay merchant David Sassoon's son, Elias, who was posted in Shanghai for 14 years soon after the opening of China in the aftermath of the First Opium War (1839-42), sailed for China, taking his *shochet* (a Jewish person trained in the ritual slaughter of certain mammals and birds for food) with him. This ensured that the orthodox Elias could observe the tenets of his religion in (then) remote Shanghai, but not shut himself away from fellow merchants and the local Chinese.

The dominance of western historiography

Another interesting facet of the conversation was Paine's recounting of what inspired him to write the encyclopaedic *The Sea & Civilisation* (2013). For one, it addressed a lacuna in his earlier book, *Ships of the World*, namely, the deep and rich maritime history

of South and South East Asia. Very few ships from the Indian Ocean (with a few exceptions) were covered, largely because of the absence of archival material, plenty of which is available on European ships since the Middle Ages.

This required recourse to the study of ethnographic, religious (the Gita) and literary sources (*Arthashastra*, *Manusmriti*) for references to shipbuilding, seafaring communities and the rules and laws that governed the navigation of the seas. According to Paine, these varied sources give an insight into the early beginnings of maritime law, as we know it today.

In the final count, this nuanced engagement with the past will result in an honest and holistic approach not just to the study and understanding of world history, but also local histories.

~ *This article was first published on the Gateway House website on 7 April 2016*

Ottoman ship *Ertuğrul*'s Bombay connection

The Turkish naval ship, TCG Gediz, was in Mumbai, retracing the Ottoman frigate Ertuğrul's 126-year-old voyage from Istanbul to Yokohoma. The Consulate of Turkey in Mumbai and Gateway House hosted a lecture by the author to commemorate the 125th anniversary of this historic passage

Amidst the dust, noise and crowds of the by-lanes off Mohammed Ali Road in south-central Mumbai, stands a white and green mosque, the Ismail Habib Masjid. It is an oasis of tranquillity, with a tinkling pool of water and shaded courtyard, and is the headquarters of the Kutchi Memons, a community of traders originally from Kutch in Gujarat.

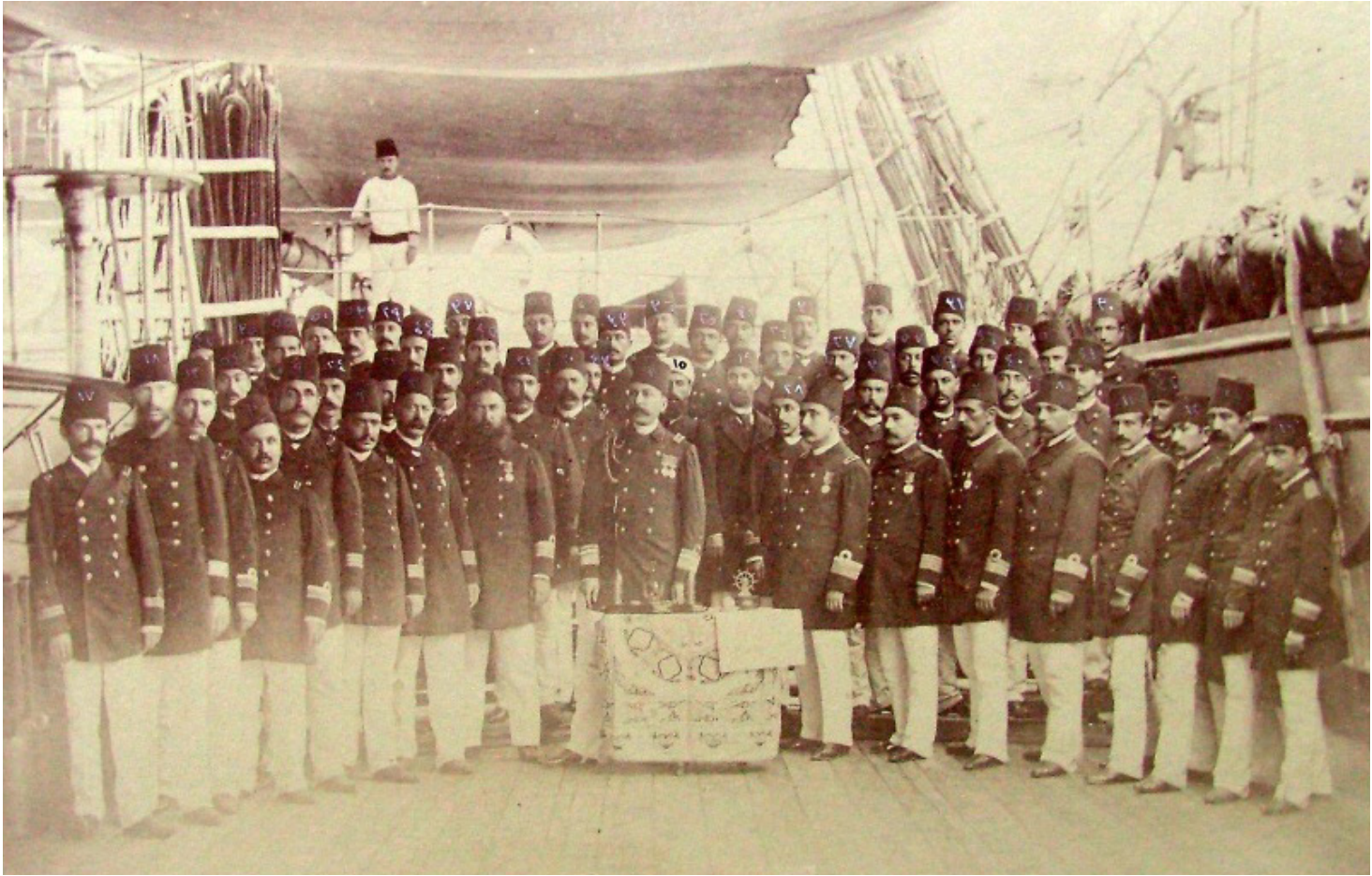
It is at this mosque, 126 years ago, that the 609 personnel aboard the *Ertuğrul*, including Rear Admiral Osman Pasha, the personal envoy of Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamit II, attended the Friday *namaz*.

The *Ertuğrul* — named after the father of Sultan Osman I, who founded the Ottoman Empire in 1299 CE — had stopped over in Bombay for refuelling from 20 to 28 October 1889. She had sailed in from Istanbul and was on her way to Yokohoma in Japan.^[1]

Upon arrival in Bombay on October 20, the ship and its crew had received a rapturous welcome. A report, in a local newspaper, the *Advocate*, stated that thousands, mostly the city's Muslims, crowded the port to catch a glimpse of the imperial frigate, sent by the *Sublime Porte* (the Ottoman Sultan).^[2]

[1] Nutku, Süleyman, Ertuğrul Firkateyni Faciasi, in *History of the Turkish Frigate Ertuğrul* (Istanbul), p. 5.

[2] Aras, Lt. Cdr. Serhan, and Lt. Mehmet Yuksel, Ertuğrul: For The Commemoration Of The 125th Anniversary Of The Frigate Ertuğrul's Voyage To Japan (Istanbul: Turkish Naval Forces, 2015) p. 101.



A photo of the crew of the imperial Ottoman Frigate Ertuğrul. The Ertuğrul docked in Bombay port for eight days whilst enroute on a diplomatic mission to Imperial Japan. Photo credit: Turkish Naval Museum Photography Archive.