



**R. J. Barendse.** *The Arabian Seas: The Indian Ocean World of the Seventeenth Century.* Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2002. xvi + 588 pp. \$43.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7656-0729-4; \$110.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7656-0728-7.

**Reviewed by** Anup Mukherjee (Independent Scholar, India)

**Published on** H-World (October, 2002)

## History on the High Seas

### History on the High Seas

Kalhana, a Kashmiri historian in Rajatarangini (1148-50 AD), has written that the historian “alone is worthy of praise whose word, like that of a judge, keeps free from love and hatred in relating the facts of the past.”[1] Barendse largely succeeds in this effort. Any reader would broadly agree with his perspectives on the various issues, even though one might differ with some of his opinions. The book is an unbiased work of high scholarship.

The book is a very interesting work. It deals with the Arabian sea rim region in the seventeenth century. But it is not just a coastal history, it is not just a history of the various East India companies, nor it is just a history of trade. It contains all these—and something more. It reflects the evolving pattern of interaction among the various historical forces of that time. The Arabian sea has been used as a medium of expression. The work attempts to put into perspective the nature of the trading system, the institutions and the organisations involved, and the nature of politics and its influence on trade. In the introduction, the author asserts, “this study is an extended brief for ‘globalism’, for in exploring and focusing on linkages within and beyond the Arabian seas, it tries to overcome the limits of the area studies approach” (p. 4).

The book also contains interesting case studies and the necessary maps. The author restricts himself to the time limit of the seventeenth century. More than three-

fourths of the book deals with India and, taking a guesstimate, 85 percent of the book is factual and only in the remaining 15 percent does the author express his opinion. As the facts and the manner of presentation (perspective) of those facts are undisputable, this review will deal mostly with that remaining 15 percent.

In chapter 2, “Ports and the Hinterland,” we get a very interesting snapshot of trading centres in Mozambique, Madagascar, Yemen, the Gulf region, Gujarat, Konkan and the Kerala. According to the author, “at sea no single state, like the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, controlled the ocean” (p. 15); he also says, “we should perceive the Arabian seas as an ‘archipelago of towns’” (p. 5). Consequently the format he adopts for the purpose of his descriptions in this chapter is to take into account the various port towns from East Africa to the Middle East and the western coast of India. Here at one point he asserts, “port cities were major killers of their population ... they constantly had to be fed by new immigrants from across seven seas...” (p. 18). Though no data in terms of population census is available from that time, other authors who have researched in this area point to the effects of an expanding economy on population increase. Thus the indigenous flow of population to these centres cannot be discounted.

Chapter 3, “European Nations in the Arabian Seas,” is rather a prelude to chapters 7, 8 and 9. Here he says that on the Arabian seas there was a “coexistence of various incompatible systems of law, or legal pluralism was

common" (p. 87). He uses the concept of "natio" to explain the nature of the trading companies, which he finds more comprehensive than terms like "trade diaspora." A subsection also deals with women and their interaction with the European traders in varied circumstances; for example, on one end it meant availability of grooms to girls of poor families in Portugal, on the other for the Dutch, Indian spouses provided not only means of acculturation but also important trade contact. And on the other extreme settlements provided outlets for gambling, drinking, and fornication. The issue of racism has also been dealt with—"though they might be married to Indian women, there was racism by poor whites too" (p. 101). The subsections "Soldiers of Fortune" and "European Freebooters in Asia" complement each other particularly well, showing different sides of the European adventurers in Asia.

In chapter 4, "Diplomacy and the State," two issues have been dealt with. One relates to legal issues such as jurisdiction and the application of laws. The other relates to the influence of politics on trade. This has been dealt with in its macro aspect—such topics as malpractices, smuggling, the sharing of revenues from customs, and also the ways of "coexistence" of the local kingdoms with the trading companies have been discussed. This coexistence included both cooperation and conflict. This has been illustrated by including cases from Adilshahis, Mughals and Marathas and their interaction with the companies. It has been fairly written that the "majority of the nobles manifested neither knowledge of nor interest in the affairs of Europeans..." (p. 141). I am reminded of Al Beruni (11th century AD) who observed similar ignorance amongst Indians of his time.

"The Merchants' World," chapter 5, seemed to me to be a prelude to the next chapter. This deals largely with the nature and structure of trade and the institutions involved in it. The author also discusses the various debates of other scholars. In terms of spatial setting, the author prefers a triad of markets in north India—"hat" (periodic small rural market), "ganj" (permanent local grain market) and "kasbah" (regional market town). But he has well deserved reservations with this. As regards the organization of the different trading communities, the author seems to have become lost in the forest of castes and communities and consequently does not fairly square up. For example he writes, "It is hard to say anything precise on the position of assemblies (mahajan) of the banias" (p. 178). In fact, mahajan was the organization of traders dealing in a specific commodity in a particular area irrespective of their castes. He does not account for the

fact that the Banias were a subcaste of the Vaishya varna (the community of traders and merchants and the common people). The Banias, unlike the Banjaras, were involved in all sorts of trading activities. And Banias were just another trading community like the Khattris, Multanis, Bohra, Khojas, Chettiars, Komattis etc. Instead the author goes on to term these councils as "bania natio" (p. 179). I also found the use of terms (pp. 184-85) like "Homo politicus" and "Homo economicus" in conjunction with "Homo hierarchicus" rather loose. It was not clear what the author wanted to convey by using these terms. And if by "Homo hierarchicus" the author adverts to the now dated theory of Louis Dumont, then I was at a further loss to understand the connection between the terms.

Chapter 6, "The Tide of Trade: Man and Merchandise," is perhaps the backbone of the book. It contains a fascinating account of bullion, indigo, textiles, pepper, arms and slave trade. These have been explained pretty meticulously. A problematic issue arises when the author rules out the possibility of "proto-industrialisation," when he says "one should be on one's guard about pushing the parallel too far" (p. 243). He doubts whether the Indian work-force was "proletarian" because it had some links with agriculture and secondly whether manufacturing caused a modification in reproduction patterns and attitudes. I feel that this is a kind of logic turned upside down. We are not speaking of industrialisation, so how could there be a "proletariat" devoid of agriculture? This is despite the fact that the artisan classes in India have usually been devoid of land and when the worst occurred there was no means other than to become landless labourers. Perhaps it would be much better to see the "proto-industrialisation" in the Marxian sense of alienation from labour. If we consider the cotton textile sector, carding, weaving, dyeing and other processes had become specialised to the extent that separate castes came into existence dealing with these works—the dhuniya, julaha and rangrez respectively. And the consequences couldn't be far off; caste means ascribed stratification by birth, which is much more comprehensive than the Marxian economic class stratification. Moreover, "proto-industrialisation" was not merely trade-related. The product profile included things like calicos, silk, indigo, saltpetre, leather products, etc. These are not just agricultural products like grain, but derived & value-added products that needed to be manufactured. The process of proto-industrialisation, in my view, should not be seen in the narrow confines of the usage of machinery, but rather it should be seen in terms of degree of distance

from the agricultural process and what growth rate such products had in proportion to the agricultural product in the given time interval.

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 deal respectively with the Portuguese, Dutch and English East India companies. They have been dealt with fairly comprehensively, showing both differences and similarities amongst these companies. This also includes descriptions of settlements, organisational structures, work methods, methods of accounting, relationships with their governments, patterns of trade, institutional corruption, private trade, patronage, ecclesiastical and administrative authorities, the nature of interactions with local trading communities, etc. He starts with an assumption, or rather an assertion: "In Europe the companies were merchants; in Asia they were states" (p. 299), and he gives his own reasons for this. In my view this leads to various methodological and theoretical problems. For example, if these companies indeed had attributes of sovereignty, why did they have to be supplicants to the local rulers even to get permission to trade? Why was it necessary to collaborate with some others? In fact, why should a "sovereign state" start with trade at all? Or why should its only objective be profit from trade? In my own view, a commercial activity is a commercial activity. And it is only myopic to say that commerce is a peaceful activity. This connection between commerce and peace lies only either in theory or in the brochures of the WTO. In reality and in history commerce has never been a "peaceful" activity. In fact commerce exists in tandem with influence and force. At the least we find companies using advertisements—and in a further step we find MNCs using the diplomatic channels of their own countries to get favourable terms. Monopolies have the attribute of force (but no sovereignty). And on the other hand states use trade as their most effective tool for coercion. Can the author think of even a single trading activity that lies outside the continuum of influence/force? The author at other places makes more realistic assertions: "Commerce always being a zero sum game..." (p. 390) and later, "trade had always been linked to the use of force" (p. 429). It would be much better to wrest back sovereignty from the trading companies to where it legitimately belongs. Perhaps, the East India companies should rather be seen as an extended arm of the early modern nation states, without assigning any aspects of sovereignty to them. They had only been "delegated" certain rights. None of the "sovereign rights" (p. 383) exercised by them was original, but only derived, delegated through charters or other legal instruments. And as these European states could not go on an

adventure like that of Alexander, the trading companies seemed a better way out. This would also take care of the cautious "may" as regards mercantilism (p. 300).

Another thing is that the author finds these companies to be "rational" in the Weberian sense and comes to a rather hasty conclusion that the VOC (the Dutch company) was a "rational bureaucracy" in the Weberian sense (p. 299), for reasons he spells out later on. In my view, Weberian bureaucracy is an "ideal type" that cannot be rigorously applied to any organization with a clean conscience. In this case the reasons—just to name a few: (1) the very basis of these companies was patronage starting from the recruitment stage (a fact repeatedly emphasised by the author), (2) Weberian bureaucracy is directly linked to money economy (and the seventeenth century had its limitations in this regard), and (3) private trade was just given a wink in these companies so that the division between public and personal remained only theoretical—led to personal wallets fattening at the cost of the organization. Bureaucracies' working on certain principles, having spelled-out work methods, and having chains of command and accountability do not alone constitute Weberian bureaucracy. I also don't find any difference in terms of "rationality" as exercised by the European companies and, say, the Mughals, even while they might have vastly differed in their organisational structures, work methods and objectives.

Another issue crops up on page 387, when the author writes as regards the VOC:

"Though free trade was undoubtedly desirable in principle, it could not be realised in practice. Not only was one dealing with Portuguese, a hereditary enemy, but the feeling of justice in Asia was very different from the European countries. Traders were compelled to assume the function of a sovereign power, for free and equitable international trade could only be conducted on the basis of law of nations. Such a foundation was not present in Asia."

A very straight question would be: was such a foundation present in Europe? Even as late as the nineteenth century we find Napoleon implementing the "continental system" and the British replying with "orders in council." And I won't be far off the mark if I say that much of the conflict among the European companies in those times had its roots in Europe rather than with either trade or local kingdoms. The author also does not make it clear as to which "law of nations" in Europe he is adverting to. Going by some of Wilson's fourteen points, the world even in the early twentieth century was devoid of "law of

nations.” An equally pertinent question would be, isn’t it true that most of the conflicts that European companies had with the local regimes were caused by the intransigence shown by the companies to the regulations in force in these lands? In my view, this east-west dichotomy as regards rules and rationality is not historically correct. Moreover, if I can take a broader perspective, according to a German thinker, Schmoller, economic phenomena cannot be separated from moral norms and beliefs. There is no society where economic relationships are not subject to customary and legal regulations. And these have to be understood in terms of the moral causes that influence them.

Also, an “undeniable benefit” (p. 393) of the monopoly system while discussing VOC, the author states, is that “the monopoly would eliminate imperfections in the market and benefit the consumer by making supplies large and predictable, whereas the producer would benefit by the expansion of production” (p. 394). This is simply counter to economics. Monopolies represent market imperfections! Also, “monopoly is inefficient because under it, price will be higher than the marginal cost, so that even if some consumers value an item more than it costs to make, they may not choose to buy it. Moreover, in the long term there is no tendency for costs to be at their lowest possible level, because the pressure of more efficient, incoming competitors does not exist.”[2] Consequently, because of this monopoly aspect, it can even be argued that these European companies were not just for trade but were also an extended arm of their respective governments either directly or indirectly fulfilling the goals of their government vis-a-vis their rival nation-states in Europe.

In “Private Deals,” the focus is on subterfuge activities like smuggling and piracy as distinct from private trade. Though these aspects have been dealt with earlier, in this chapter the scope is broadened to include the American and West Indies connections.

The final chapter is “Concluding Thoughts.” Even though the author has in some previous chapters given “conclusions,” they were more a summary and discussion of the arguments of other scholars. In this one, the author puts in his own conclusions. Here he is more realistic in his assertions and it would be useful to quote them as they are: “I would go one step further ... and argue instead that there was only one world economy rather than several...” (p. 490); “while it is certainly not true that Europeans dominated the Arabian seas, it is equally untrue to say they were not significant; they were, and increas-

ingly so” (p. 491); “if it did not cause the rise of Europe, the fall of Asia was to a very large extent ... caused by the rise of Europe in Asia” (p. 492); “rather than saying that Europeans and Asians were partners, one might say they were part of the same trade network” (p. 493); “Yet, under cloak of cordial and equitable commercial relationships, the European presence was first and foremost built on a capacity to deploy armed force and on the contained use of force.... The use of violence is thus a critical issue when studying European trade in Arabian seas” (pp. 493-94); “activities of the companies were ... a part of a much larger development: the integration of Arabian seas within the modern world system. The trade flows in the Atlantic, and the sweat and tears of Indians and black slaves on which the commerce was erected was the heartbeat of the conjuncture of the modern world” (p. 495); and “interests of the trade organization became increasingly subordinated to those of the state” (p. 498).

As to the utility of the work to academics, researchers and students, it is a wealth of information culled from original sources. It must however be remembered that this is not a basic book. This is an advanced book and many of the arguments, issues and even facts can be understood only when one has prior understanding of this region. The focus of this book is the Arabian seas, but the issues that the book deals with has to be seen in the larger perspective of various historical forces of that time that had ramifications not only in Europe but also in the American continent and also in the time line of the process of colonisation. The work is based on the original sources derived mostly from the accounts of the European merchants, seafarers, travellers and the records of the European trading companies operating in the region during that time. The book is invaluable for researchers. The book is in its third edition, the original being the author’s Ph.D. thesis. Consequently, I find this book, despite its conclusions, to be evolving. And even though Barendse says in the preface, “this approach is sure to conflict with established national schools of historiography and with established methodology of ‘area studies’...,” I found it amongst the finest studies in world history, being more focused and more comprehensive at the same time, and more realistic, too. And I would agree with the author when he writes in the preface, “I hope that the topic of this book will captivate the mind and imagination of the reader as much as it did mine.”

#### Notes

[1]. R. K. Majumdar and A. N. Shrivastava, *Historiography* (Surjeet, 1991), p. 304.

[2]. Graham Bannock, R. E. Baxter, and Evan Davis, *The Penguin Dictionary of Economics* (Penguin, 1987), p. 281.

Other H-Net resources by Prof. R. J. Barendse on the same subject:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-world&month=0203&week=d&msg=H/ACGXzwKUR9T1UzpWhUbA&user=&pw=>

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-world&month=0203&week=e&msg=1Ohz%2bZdIAY4KsRJ1J5C%2bug&user=&pw=>

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-world&month=0206&week=b&msg=2b/h8gfYDfmCHgmJM51Q3Q&user=&pw=>

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-world>

**Citation:** Anup Mukherjee. Review of Barendse, R. J., *The Arabian Seas: The Indian Ocean World of the Seventeenth Century*. H-World, H-Net Reviews. October, 2002.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6849>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).