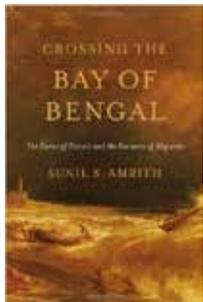


Book Reviews

Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants, by Sunil S. Amrith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013, pp. 1-285, 287-353).

—Reviewed by Michael Rynkeiwich



Between the Global (everyone's favorite concept) and the Local (the place where the narrative hits the road) lie several levels of organization such as the national (on its way out, but still a force). Lost in the rush among missiologists to leverage globalization and diaspora for mission is an old and still significant force called "regionalization." The region has its

own dynamics, economy, politics, migration, order, and opportunities for mission. Understanding the region is a missional task. After all, was not Mediterraneanization the context for the spread of the gospel in the first centuries of the church?

The Bay of Bengal bordered now by Ceylon, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, is a region with well-worn seaways. The nations are modern, but the region is much older, fully as old as the Arabian Sea region on the other side of India, whose ports and routes are clearly described in the first century AD.

The Bay of Bengal region saw the migration of labor (especially from Ceylon and south India to Malaysia), the diffusion of products (e.g., Tamil merchants and products to Myanmar), and ideas (Islam, capitalism, Christianity). The earliest Malaysian autobiography begins with a Hadrami Arab migrating from Yemen to Ceylon where he married a Tamil Muslim woman; their children moved to Malaysia and Indonesia; and their children in turn met the Portuguese who sailed into Melaka in 1511. All the children and grandchildren were multilingual and multicultural—500 years ago. The next year, when the Portuguese druggist Tomé Pires walked the streets of Melaka, he recorded the names of 84 languages that he heard being spoken. The Portuguese did not create the network, they stumbled into a centuries old community. Globalization is no new phenomenon.

In *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, Amrith works his way up to the present illustrating every era through Portuguese, Dutch, and then British dominance to today's independent nations. He pays little attention to Christian missions since

economy and migration are his themes as he describes the ebb and flow of the Bay as an inter-connected region. However, he does address, not unexpectedly, the spread of Islam from west to east across the region, and there are lessons here to be learned. For example, he describes the conversion of the ruling family of Melaka in 1419 which

cemented the relationship between Islam, trade, and the port polities of the Indian Ocean rim; port cities with Muslim rulers were hospitable to Muslim and non-Muslim merchants from across Asia. (p. 41)

Of what interest is this kind of book to missionaries? Every culture, every region has a history of shared understandings and embedded relationships as well as dueling narratives and ruptured visions for the future. For example, Amrith discusses the situation immediately after World War II: "New ideologies—more aggressive, more martial than before—claimed the postwar order, and few of them had room for people between homes, between countries, between journeys" (p. 214). The insight here is that, when the British Empire was in its heyday, movement was actually easier because it was "internal" in a sense. With the emergence of nation states, migration was slowed for several decades. The missionary arriving in the region in 1990 might assume that what's seen has been in place for hundreds of years, when in fact the social scene had only recently been frozen that way. As the new era of globalization after 1990 reveals new opportunities for migration and diaspora, we can now see that it isn't new at all, but a revival of old pathways. That means that there is much more depth to the beliefs and behaviors one encounters in the streets of Melaka or Penang or Chittagong today than imagined, a depth that must be understood if the gospel is to be heard in words and actions that local people understand.

There are not enough books like Amrith's available, and certainly not enough of these kinds of studies being carried out by doctoral students in Missiology. Fortunately, there are some works about labor migration in the Arabian Sea region. Two worthwhile reads are:

Andrew M. Gardner, *City of Strangers: Gulf Migration and the Indian Community in Bahrain*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, (2010).

Abdulhadi Khalaf, Omar AlShehabi, and Adam Hanieh, editors, *Transit States: Labour, Migration and Citizenship in the Gulf*. London: Pluto Press, (2015). **IJFM**