

## OF PORTS AND PORTUGAL: KEYWORDS IN HONOUR OF MICHAEL PEARSON

Pamila Gupta

To cite this article: Gupta, Pamila. "Of Ports and Portugal: Keywords in Honour of Michael Pearson." *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018), pp. 25-35.

More information about the *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies* can be found at:  
[jiows.mcgill.ca](http://jiows.mcgill.ca)

# OF PORTS AND PORTUGAL: KEYWORDS IN HONOUR OF MICHAEL PEARSON

**Pamila Gupta**

WiSER, University of the Witwatersrand

## ABSTRACT

This article will track my own intellectual engagement with Michael Pearson's wide-ranging scholarship (on topics that range from ports to Portugal) over a twenty-year span (1995-2015). Similar to Pearson, I began my academic career as a Goa (Indo-Portuguese) specialist and moved onto studying the Indian Ocean as a point of connection and comparison across aquatic terrains. I will take up certain "keywords" as a vocabulary of culture and society (following Raymond Williams, 1976) specific to Pearson's oeuvre in order to show my conceptual development through his scholarship, and his important contributions to historiography and historical studies. Keywords will range from "corruption, corsairs and crowds" in 16th -17th century Portuguese India, to "ports, islands, the monsoon, and a whiff of the ozone" in the Indian Ocean world, and lastly to "hippies and tourism" in postcolonial Goa.

## INTRODUCTION

I called these words Keywords in two connected senses: they are significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought (Williams, 1983: 15).

This essay will track my own intellectual engagement with Michael Pearson's wide-ranging scholarship (on topics that range from ports to Portugal) over a twenty-year span (1995-2015). Similar to Pearson, I began my academic career as a Goa (Indo-Portuguese) specialist and moved onto studying the Indian Ocean as a point of connection and comparison across aquatic terrains. I will take up certain "keywords" as a vocabulary of culture and society (following Raymond Williams, 1976[1983]) specific to Pearson's oeuvre in order to show my conceptual development through his scholarship, and his important contributions to historiography and historical studies more generally. Keywords

will range from “corruption, corsairs and crowds” in 16<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> Century Portuguese India, to “ports, islands, the monsoon, and a whiff of the ozone” in the Indian Ocean world, and lastly to “hippies and tourism” in postcolonial Goa.

I first met Michael Pearson through his scholarship as a graduate student of Portuguese India enrolled in the Joint Programme in Anthropology and History at the University of Michigan in the mid 1990s. Ten years later, I had completed my PhD, moved to Johannesburg and was a lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at the University of the Witwatersrand. Michael Pearson was on the top of my list of potential speakers for an international conference I was co-organizing with my colleague Isabel Hofmeyr (African Literature, Wits) on a relatively new area of scholarship that was just beginning to open up and that I was drawn to, the Indian Ocean. Michael graciously accepted our invitation and I soon found myself having dinner with him one cold Johannesburg evening in August 2007. The scholarship and the person finally came together in that moment; ours was a shared conversation over a range of topics –the macabre body of St. Francis Xavier, tourism and Goa’s hippie scene, the University of Michigan, the Portuguese archives, the Indian Ocean. He confessed that he had never heard of me or my PhD work until one week in April 2007 when he received a request to be a reviewer of my book manuscript for a University Press, and an email invitation from me to come to South Africa. It was meant to be, he laughed.

### **CORRUPTION, CORSAIRS, AND CROWDS**

Goa under the Portuguese was always more than itself, more than simply a port city. It was the focus of their entire seaborne empire, its prosperity in the 16<sup>th</sup> century...mark [ed] fluctuations in Portuguese fortunes in all Asia rather than any change in Goa and its hinterlands (Pearson, 1981: 74).

I first read Michael Pearson’s Cambridge volume *The Portuguese in India* (1987) as a first year graduate student trying to grasp the complexity of the history of Portuguese imperialism in Asia over the longue duree; it was my chosen topic and I needed to read and cast widely in order to come up with my own project, one that I hoped would be a contribution to this vast literature. Later, after I had narrowed my PhD topic, conducted 6 months of archival research in Lisbon, one and a half years of fieldwork in Goa, and was writing up my PhD in New York (I had since transferred from the University of Michigan to Columbia along with my thesis Supervisor, Professor Nicholas Dirks), I came across an earlier important book of his entitled, *Coastal Western India* (1981). Several chapters on topics such as “corruption” and “corsairs”, the “crowd”, and the “port city” would prove seminal for my own work. My PhD was now taking shape as a historical ethnography of the expositions of St Francis Xavier as way to look at the history of entanglements of the Jesuits with the *Estado da Índia* over the period of their colonial rule in Goa (1510-

1961). That these expositions had been staged at fairly even 100-year intervals created a framework for writing an episodic history (one of both continuity and rupture) of Goa through the veneration of a Catholic missionary's decaying corpse. It was to be a parallel biography of a state and a saint.

Pearson's ideas initially helped provide a framework for writing about corruption in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Goa and its relationship to piracy (corsairs), trade, and Portuguese colonialism ("Corruption and Corsairs in Sixteenth Century Western India: A Functional Analysis"). I was better able to represent Goa once I conceived of it as both a port city and "frontier society" ("The Port City of Goa: Policy and Practice in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century") and the role of Goa's Viceroys through a lens of corruption—the amassing of great fortunes in the colonies very much tied to the securing of titles and land deeds in the metropole (Gupta, 2014: 89). Different types of corruption were then taken up in my first and second chapters (Incorruption, Canonization). Pearson's idea of the "crowd" ("The Crowd in Portuguese India") in Portuguese India enabled me to conceptualize the diverse publics (and counter publics that functioned on the sidelines) that attended the expositions of Xavier in 1554 and 1624 (Gupta, 2014).

Entitled, *The Relic State: St. Francis Xavier and the Politics of Ritual in Portuguese India*, my PhD-turned-book was published by Manchester University Press in 2014 in their "Studies in Imperialism" Series. Michael's excellent scholarship—particularly his excellent overview of the Portuguese in India, as well as his development of certain historical categories such as "corruption", "corsairs" and the "crowd", helped fine-tune my own analysis. The sharpness with which he framed each entry also allowed me the space to move them beyond the early modern time frame he had in mind to trace them over the longue duree (16<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries). More generally, Pearson's writings helped me to cast a wider net, to "read" the history of a state's corruption through repeated material attempts to preserve the incorruption of Xavier's corpse by way of public display. These later expositions (1782, 1859, and 1952) became the framing devices for subsequent chapters (Secularization, Resurrection, and Commemoration). As well, his very productive feedback on my book manuscript when it was in its final stages of revision were integrated into an academic text that I hope contributes in much the same way that Michael Pearson's scholarship has, to a better understanding of the history and historiography of Portuguese colonialism in India. In my acknowledgements, I give a special thanks to Michael "who always had faith in my little (big) book" (2014: xiii).

Lastly, I want to end this first section by stressing the importance and endurance of Michael Pearson's pioneering work in the field of Indo-Portuguese history. One the one hand, he is one of its first specialist historians (alongside Sanjay Subrahmanyam), firmly establishing it as a fruitful area of scholarship that has the potential to offer a lens onto the nature of maritime empires such as the *Estado*. In the process, Pearson's archival work has successfully carved out a space for highlighting the particulars of the Portuguese in India, thinking about its land-based qualities as equally comparable to the British,

French or Dutch, and as sustaining itself through an engagement with multiple local networks. He offers yet another lens onto the nature of trade, capitalism and markets (including that which takes place in the margins or cleavages of empire) as central to state-making processes. Pearson's contributions in this area have recently been revived and extended in innovative ways by historian Johan Mathew who looks at a different time/space configuration— that of the illicit trade and trafficking practices of the British in the Arabian Sea during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (2016). On the other hand, Pearson's enduring scholarship provides a set of necessary keywords for approaching this vast literature, historical categories that have become historiographical ones as a result of his work, and which allow for the study of historical change. Lastly, Pearson has sharpened its debate and future directions, and helped train a next generation of Indo-Portuguese scholars like myself.

### **ISLANDS, PORTS, THE MONSOON, AND A WHIFF OF OZONE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN WORLD**

I hope people will read my book. To this end, I want it to have a whiff of ozone, not just be a collection of statistics about trade (Pearson, 2003: 9).

In a parallel move, both Michael and I shifted from working on Indo-Portuguese history to the Indian Ocean world. In retrospect, I suppose it was a shift in scholarship that makes sense given the fact that early modern Portuguese imperialism could not be written without thinking about its role in the larger Indian Ocean world of trade and commerce. Yet, Indian Ocean studies as it was conceptualized in the early to mid 2000s was largely formed as a critique of area studies, and with less of an exclusive focus on the early history of maritime trade. Instead, this burgeoning field of study looked to macro changes and network theory, not only of politics and economy but the environment as well. It called for and invited an interdisciplinary approach for its aim was to de-center certain metropolises in favour of writing connected imperial histories (Metcalf, 2007), of horizontal movements across colonies, of earlier moments of mobility found in the cleavages of empire (Ho 2007), with an emphasis on the South as a global network in and of itself, without a dependence on the North.

Michael Pearson's monumental book, simply titled *The Indian Ocean* (2003) was a critical book in developing this area of scholarship. It preceded Sugata Bose's book entitled, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (2006). Together, these two authors firmly put Indian Ocean studies on the scholarly map. I still return often to my worn and marked up copy of Michael's book, to discover yet another topic that I didn't realize he had written about, and quite extensively at that. Growing up as a New Zealander and with a seafaring sailor wife—personal details that featured prominently in Michael's own narration of himself to me—, I surmise that Michael was always poised to write about the ocean. Technical terms tied to the art of sailing are discussed in detail.

I learn sophisticated and new vocabularies of the Indian Ocean: of *umlands* (31), *dhow*s (63), *ambergris* (84), *echelles* (92, 100) and *rabetting* (185). Even St. Francis Xavier makes a few curt appearances in Michael's book (2003: 173-177)!

Several of Michael's conceptual frameworks developed in this book helped me to articulate my first Indian Ocean research projects. His deep history of fishing and the high value of prawn exportation along the Indian Ocean rim taught me so much about the world of fishermen— what he calls “fish, fish habits, waves, currents, and stars” (Pearson, 2003: 268)—, thus enabling me to write about a little known Goan artisanal prawn fishing community living on the edge of the Indian Ocean in Mozambique (Gupta, 2010). His fine-tuned writings on the concept of the “littoral” (Pearson, 2006), a term first introduced in his Indian Ocean book (2003: 37-41), only developed further in this companion article, also shaped the way I saw this group of fisher-folk, as a way of being in the world that was integrally shaped by water and land, living on the edge of both simultaneously. Michael's detailed discussion of the monsoon as one of the “deep structure elements” and as a “complicated weather pattern” of the Indian Ocean helped me write a lyrical, discursive, temporal and aesthetic ruminative piece on them (Gupta, 2012: 518). As well, his writings on port cities as “hinges,” as connecting different maritime zones (Pearson, 2003: 31) pushed me to write a history of cruise liner ships operating along the Southern African shoreline during the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, based on two *Union Castle Line* guidebooks (1939, 1949) I had come across in a second-hand bookshop in Johannesburg (Gupta, 2015). Finally, his idea of a “whiff of ozone” would come to play a sensorial role in many of my writings on the Indian Ocean. That is, I learned the important lesson from Michael to “leaven my dry descriptive prose with a more immediate maritime experience” (Pearson quoted in Gupta, 2015: 152).

Michael's first trip to South Africa in 2007 to participate in the *Eyes Across the Water: Navigating the Indian Ocean* conference, and second stint at Wits University as a visiting professor for 6 weeks in residence the following year (2008) also shaped my research trajectories as a scholar of the Indian Ocean. It was during this second visit that we sat down together, along with Isabel Hofmeyr, to conceptualize the beginnings of an edited volume from the conference proceedings, for we realized that we had the makings of an Indian Ocean book. As we grouped the articles together in subsections, we identified several missing themes in the extant scholarship. Michael committed himself to writing about the “idea of the ocean” (2010: 7-14) while Isabel wrote about “Africa as a fault-line in the Indian Ocean” (2010: 99-108). We conceived of a gap in the literature on Indian Ocean islands, including how to explore their littoral-ness following Michael's work. I contributed a chapter on “Islandness in the Indian Ocean” (2010: 275-285). Entitled *Eyes Across the Water: Navigating the Indian Ocean*, the edited volume was published by UNISA Press in 2010 and was well received by Indian Ocean students and scholars. Michael and I continued our scholarly conversations on the Indian Ocean over the next few years, meeting in Perth (2008), Sydney (2009), Goa (2009), and Dubai (2015), both of us adding to our widening map of Indian Ocean port cities visited and conferences

participated in—parallel Indian Ocean lives.

Michael Pearson's Indian Ocean writings hold such breath and breadth, and will do so for future generations of scholars. He has compelled us to define new terms (where there are none or do not adequately fit, including those that are incongruent due to their territorial bias) for studying the life aquatic. He has increased our vocabularies to think with, by, and in water, even as he has blurred the line between what comprises the shore versus the ocean. He has asked hard questions, asking if sociality at sea is a reproduction of what happens on land, or if in fact it is something else. By emphasizing difference, he cautions, then perhaps we are creating too much distance between dry and wet. Pearson has also widened his oceanic scope and expertise to include biology, the natural sciences and literature; as a result, his Indian Ocean writings have a wider appeal and reach beyond the historians and anthropologists who are largely the readers of his Indo-Portuguese historical studies. Pearson also posits room for looking at historical, economic and environmental change by way of an emphasis on the oceanic, including our watery futures. Once again, his analytical categories serve as Indian Ocean keywords: "islands", "ports", the "monsoon", the "littoral", and "a whiff of the ozone" will come to play an even more crucial role in Oceanic Studies more generally, particularly in the face of the "slow violence" (Nixon, 2013) of global warming in the era of the Anthropocene.

### **TOURISM AND HIPPIES IN GOA**

A beach scene frequently found in Goa, and in other beach resorts on the west coast such as Kovalam, is typical. Portly western men in G-strings self-consciously help traditional fishermen haul in their nets, which may contain enough for one meal. Their bikini-clad women enthusiastically take video pictures of this picturesque scene (Pearson, 2003: 275).

The above scene depicted by Michael is hardly picturesque; having spent large portions of time in Goa over the last twenty something years (and knowing Michael and his thirty plus something years of visiting this place frequently (2003: 274), it is an all too familiar and painful scene for both of us. Thus, on the one hand, we both know and understand that the expansion of tourism is a global reality, and that it is an important factor in Goa's economic stability. On the other, we both realize its very real impact, having seen it play out in front of us each year we visit Goa and see more tourists, ever more high-rise complexes on the horizon, and more litter and exposed nudity on the beaches.

Michael relies on and frequently uses Goa as a case study for understanding tourism more generally in the Indian Ocean. He points to recent data from the year 2000 to show that "the number of tourists who visit each year is just below the total local population" (2003: 274), and that out of an estimated population of 1,400,000, a little over one third (an estimated 400,000) are reliant on the tourism industry (2003: 274). These are staggering figures in my mind that along with my own enduring interest in all things

Goan (from both a scholarly and experiential perspective) led me to study tourism in Goa. It is equally an enduring topic for Michael as well, for when I was looking in my office for any additional papers for the writing of this article, I found an unpublished manuscript that Michael must have given to me at some point during our correspondence entitled, “An Overview of Tourism in Goa.” It is an excellent overview, one that I continue to rely on for my own writings on tourism, even those that move out of the space of Goa.

In some ways, my doctoral research (archival and ethnographic, 1998-2000) on the colonial and missionary history of the expositions of St. Francis Xavier had shown me the relevance of the topic of tourism and its seminal role in shaping Xavier’s postcolonial expositions. I took on the theme of “the corporeal and the carnivalesque” during a return visit to Goa to conduct ethnographic research on Xavier’s exposition of 2004-2005, the first one that I witnessed first-hand, having started my PhD project in the year following his last decennial exposition of 1994-95 (Gupta, 2017). My frequent visits to Goa over the last twenty years have also taught me that Goa’s history of Portuguese colonialism, whilst directly shaping its cultural otherness in distinction to the rest of India, is equally caught up in discourses of tourism. This is a point I fully developed in a publication entitled “Goa Dourada, the Internal Exotic in South Asia: Discourses of Colonialism and Tourism” (Gupta, 2009).

Developing this foundational piece led me to conduct additional research in November 2009 and write about hippies, trance, drugs, and Goa’s more recent Russian invasion of tourism, in a piece entitled “Frozen Vodka and White Skin in Tourist Goa” (2014). Michael Pearson’s discussion of “enclave tourism” where the “only locals met are waiters, servants, and taxi drivers” (Pearson, 2003: 274), features prominently in my article (Gupta, 2014: 99) for it helped me set the tourist scene and better understand the role of expat British long term residents in Goa today. Michael’s Indian Ocean work (2003) has important discussions on the environmental effects of sustained tourism; he includes many examples from his multiple visits to Goa to show their very real impact on this popular tourist site since the 1960s (2003: 275). His background research provided the necessary tools for me to trace the disturbing story of a marooned iron ore container ship that had been polluting the waters of Candolim beach over a twelve year period (Gupta, 2014: 101-102), and question the long term effects of tourism in Goa, to ask if the party is finally over? Lastly, one of Michael’s more curious details—having witnessed them when he first visited Goa in 1968—, were “brochures for bus sightseeing tours” that promised beaches where “naked [white] hippies will be seen” (2003: 274) to middle class Indian tourists. This again proved useful for my own research on tourism in Goa some forty years later, for it led me to conceptualize these two distinct groups of tourists (foreign and domestic) not as separate spheres but rather as “interpellated by each other as they simultaneously gaze upon one another” (Gupta 2014: 106). As well, “each tourist group is further exoticized and popularized by its distinction from the other, which in turn, bolsters tourism in India more generally” (Gupta, 2014: 106). It is exactly the kind of fine grained historical analysis (and here I would add “ethnographic” for I would



label Michael as good an anthropologist) that he undertakes by the nature of conducting research in a place like Goa over many years that enabled me in much the same way, to be attuned to its nuances over the *longue duree*.

Once again, I want to end this section by highlighting the importance of Pearson's writings for a next generation of scholars studying tourism. Not only has he shown the benefits of conducting long-term research in one tourist site such as Goa, but he offers a methodology of sorts, using his expertise in and knowledge of one place as a case study for making larger analytic points about the nature of tourism economies more generally. Pearson's scholarship helps reveal the relational quality between colonialism and tourism, and types of tourists (domestic and international; hippies vs trance-goers). He also highlights the very real costs and benefits of tourism (not only economic but environmental as well) which is an increasing reality in many parts of the world. His keywords of "hippies" and "tourism" showcase the importance of their study as operating less on the fringes of society and culture; he moves them from the margins to the center of our analyses, including tourism's ability to reflect the speed of historical change.

#### **AN AFTERWORD**

In writing about a field of meanings I have often wished that some form of presentation could be devised in which it would be clear that the analyses of particular words are intrinsically connected, sometimes in complex ways (Williams, 1983: 25).

By way of conclusion to this festschrift, I want to recall fondly Michael Pearson the person and mentor, and through his keywords. The latter, as I demonstrated, have been integral to developing my own scholarship and in creating a substantial and enduring body of work on the themes of Indo-Portuguese history, Indian Ocean studies and tourism. Over the years, Michael and I would frequently exchange emails catching up on news and travel plans to see if by chance we would overlap in some exciting place in the world. In the fall of 2011, I was a visiting Professor of Anthropology at New School University in New York City. Michael happened to be in town to give a talk on the Indian Ocean at New York University. We met up for brunch, and walked around a grey and rainy New York City, half talking half shopping together for his 20 something year old son who was also in town and had accompanied us; he was in search of some new sneakers. We departed on a friendly note, his very tall and lanky son (clearly his father's son for anyone who has stood next to a towering Michael) having found a pair of sneakers he wanted. Jump ahead a year and I receive an email out of the blue from Michael (dated November 21, 2012). He writes:

*Your boy [St. Francis Xavier] certainly gets around! Or at least part of him does.  
Best to all three of you. I'm in INdia(sic) all Dec—any chance of you? And Lisboa  
in April*

*Michael*

Attached to the brief email note was a neatly scanned copy of a clipped newspaper article entitled,

“HOLY RELIC OF ST FRANCIS XAVIER VISITED BALLINA [NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA]”.

## REFERENCES

- Bose, Sugata. *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Gupta, Pamila. "The Corporeal and the Carnavalesque: the 2004 exposition of St. Francis Xavier and the consumption of history in postcolonial Goa." *Etnográfica* 21, no. 1 (2017): 107-124.
- . "Consuming the Coast: Mid-Century Communications of Port Tourism in the Southern African Indian Ocean." *Comunicação, Mídia e Consumo, São Paulo* 12, no. 35 (Sept/December 2015): 149-170.
- . *The Relic State: St. Francis Xavier and the Politics of Ritual in Portuguese India*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014.
- . "Some (Not so) Lost Aquatic Traditions: Goans Going Fishing in the Indian Ocean." *Interventions* 16, no 6 (2014): 854-876.
- . "Frozen Vodka and White Skin in Tourist Goa." In *Tourism and the Power of Otherness: Seductions of Difference*, eds. D. Picard & M. Di Giovine, 95-109. Bristol: Channel View Publications, 2014.
- . "Monsoon Fever." *Social Dynamics* 38, no. 3 (September 2012): 516-527.
- Gupta, Pamila, and Isabel Hofmeyr and Michael Pearson, eds. *Eyes Across the Water: Navigating the Indian Ocean*. Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2010.
- . "Goa, the Internal 'Exotic' in South Asia: Discourses of Colonialism and Tourism." In *Reading the Exotic, South Asia and its Others*, eds. A. Phukan & V.G. Rajan, 123-148. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009.
- Ho, Engseng. *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- Mathew, Johan. *Margins of the Market: Trafficking and Capitalism across the Arabian Sea*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016.
- Metcalf, Thomas. *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.

Pearson, Michael. "An Overview of Tourism." Unpublished ms, personal communication), 2008.

———. "Littoral Society: The Concept and the Problems." *Journal of World History* 17, no. 4 (December 2006): 353-373.

———. *The Indian Ocean*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

———. *The Portuguese in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

———. *Coastal Western India*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1981.

Williams, Raymond. *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.