



Fifth Annual Pierre du Bois Doctoral Workshop

Seas of Change: Indian Ocean Mobilities at the End of Empire

Dates: 5–6 June 2025

Venue: Geneva Graduate Institute, Geneva

Hosted by: Department of International History and Politics, Geneva Graduate Institute, in partnership with the Fondation Pierre du Bois pour l'histoire du temps présent

Overview

The **Fifth Annual Pierre du Bois Doctoral Workshop**, titled “Seas of Change: Indian Ocean Mobilities at the End of Empire,” took place at the Geneva Graduate Institute on 5–6 June 2025. The objective of the workshop was to follow mobile lives at a time when multiple colonies across the Indian Ocean rim emerged as independent states, and explore how our understandings of this region can be enriched by bringing together histories of decolonisation and histories of mobility. Workshop participants were invited to think about connections across time and space in this crucial period when the region experienced violent ruptures and formal border-making. The question at the heart of the workshop was: how can oceanic connections help us reimagine temporal and spatial considerations of the mid-twentieth century? In the spirit of the Foundation’s commitment to writing “l’histoire du temps présent” or current histories, the workshop endeavored to unsettle contemporary concerns with tighter border controls and nationalist discourses by highlighting the history of mobilities and immobilities in this pivotal world-region.

Theme and Scholarly Rationale

Historians of the Indian Ocean since the days of Fernand Braudel have long emphasized the fact that the sea was a bridge as much as a barrier to mobility. These histories denaturalized the neatly-bounded territorial units that are typically used to write history and in many ways foreshadowed the later rise of global history. However, such an oceanic lens has rarely been applied to the mid-twentieth century, when the emergence of modern nation-states tended to cause historians to lose sight of the ocean. In convening this workshop, we hoped to recover these earlier methods and see what mobile lives could tell us about the predominant themes of mid-twentieth century history. Using the Indian Ocean as our base was therefore not merely a spatial frame of reference, but a provocation to think more fluidly about time, space, and the entangled lives that are often obscured when we centre our studies on individual nation-states.

Participants and Format



The workshop was attended by participants in person and online. There were a total of 13 participants from universities in India, Switzerland, Germany, the US and the UK. The workshop also welcomed two historians currently leading critical research on the Indian Ocean region — professors Sana Aiyar (MIT) and Kalyani Ramnath (Columbia University). There were three panels and one roundtable conversation between professors Aiyar and Ramnath, who spoke about their own research and related their work to the themes of the workshop. Each panel had one discussant who commented on the individual presentations, after which the floor was open for other participants to engage and interact.

Programme and Proceedings

Panel 1 — Bordered Lives: Migration, Citizenship and Sovereignty across Oceans

This panel saw presentations from four panelists: Aiswarya Sanath (Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur), Christian Jones (Freie Universität, Berlin), Cherene Aniyar (Rutgers University, New Jersey) and Aratrika Ganguly (University of Calcutta). Professor Bernard Keo (Department of International History and Politics, IHEID) was the discussant for this panel. The panel engaged with themes central to the workshop—statelessness, nationality law, border regimes and migrant belonging. The presentations spanned the Indian Ocean from Oman to Malabar, Bengal and the Malay Peninsula. Across these varied geographies, the presentations explored social and political fractures produced by imperialism, nationalism and displacement in various colonies of the British Empire.

Panel 2 — Beyond Dichotomies

This panel featured presentations by Lucas Gatignol (University of Lausanne), Jodie Marshall (Washington State University) and Paul Deshusses (IHEID), with Kalyani Ramnath (Columbia University, New York) acting as the discussant. The presentations challenged typical dichotomies of analysis, such as between free and unfree labour, mobility and immobility, and human and non-human experiences. In the discussion, it became clear that it was important to question who employs categories like “coolies”, “unfree” or “free labour” and why, instead of merely questioning the utility of such terms. The discussion also reminded us that histories of mobility are incomplete without histories of immobility. And finally, this panel encouraged us to think about where else to look for archives of the Indian Ocean. Beyond written records institutionalised for human actors, this could mean a history of marine animal sounds or scientific animal perception studies which reimagine the Ocean as more connected and compact and yet experiencing the upheavals of human activities.

Panel 3 — Interpreting Burmese Pasts Post-Partition

This panel explored histories of displacement and the varied experiences of rehabilitation of Indian



families from Burma to South Asia (India and Bangladesh). Participants of this panel included Noel George (London School of Economics), Pratim Das (GATIM University, Hyderabad), Saheli Chatterjee (IHEID) and Azrin Afrin (University of Edinburgh). Sana Aiyar (MIT) was the discussant for the panel. By narrating the oral histories of returnees, refugees and repatriates of an Indian lineage, presently rehabilitated in India and Bangladesh, the presenters reminded us of the significant afterlives of earlier twentieth-century circulations. The discussion raised the idea of expanding the scale of this story to other displacements across the Indian Ocean, drawing comparisons with places like Uganda. While thinking of more oceanic interconnections linked with migrants' collective experiences of displacement, the panelists also highlighted the importance of local histories and possible future avenues of research into local political parties, schools and even property regimes.

Roundtable

For the final session, professors Kalyani Ramnath and Sana Aiyar introduced their current research and upcoming monographs and situated their work within the context of the workshop themes and discussions. The roundtable was chaired by Professor Aidan Russell (Department of International History and Politics, IHEID). Aiyar's presentation, titled "Sacred Geographies, Political Communities," unsettled Burma's representation in nationalist historiographies, primarily by exploring the life and history of an itinerant preacher, U Ottama. Instead of "circulations" of migrants, the Indian Ocean region, in Aiyar's research, comes alive through "reverberances" of religious majoritarian ideas shared across Hindu and Buddhist religious organisations both in India and Burma during the 1920s–30s. Ramnath's presentation, "Risky Maritime Crossings at Empire's Edges," introduced *longue durée* questions about sovereignty over the ocean and who exercises jurisdictional powers. She explored the idea of divisible sovereignty and the importance of property when it comes to the ocean, and how it exposes the convergence of multiple relationships. Through her presentation, Ramnath brings us back to foundational questions such as: what do we mean when we talk about "oceanic history"? And how does the ocean come to be measured, mapped, and governed over time? We learnt to trace colonial administration and governance from a different perspective and to think more closely with historical actors like coastal communities when it comes to property and ownership, beyond landed territories and into the oceanic expanse instead.

Key Takeaways and Conclusion

The success of the workshop owed itself to the shared interests of the panelists, discussants and audience in its central themes. Although everyone drew on their own case studies and research specializations, these only served to enrich broader discussions. Across the two days, several key takeaways emerged. Both at the outset of the workshop and at its conclusion, we invited



participants to think more critically about what it means to employ an oceanic perspective. This led to wider reflections on the genealogical roots of categories and how they are carried across time and space. We also recognized that, although we focused on the Indian Ocean, it is important not to lose sight of the limits of this framework and the potential to draw comparisons with other world regions. After all, it was not just the Indian Ocean where mobilities were at stake in the political transformations of the mid-twentieth century. We remained mindful of the fact that the afterlives of these topics are still with us today among those who inherit this past. The conclusion of the workshop promised trajectories for future collaborations and collective ground to take these conversations further.