

5th Satadru Sen Memorial Lecture, 2024

Department of History, Presidency University, Kolkata

DATE: 04th October 2024, TIME: 2 PM

VENUE: P. C. Mahalanobis Auditorium

RECONFIGURING INDIAN OCEAN STUDIES: CULTURAL, SPATIAL AND NON-HUMAN PERSPECTIVES

Speaker: Lakshmi Subramanian

Abstract

The presentation reviews the critical shifts in Indian Ocean studies particularly in terms of how the field has come to stand for a new imagining of human and non-human activity not only on the shore but both on and under water whose properties and features are not as easy to capture as land. Newly emerging perspectives have simultaneously offered a robust critique of the models that have been previously adopted for understanding the Indian Ocean, and new ways of looking at a deeply connected maritime space of enduring commercial and cultural interactions whose spatial and social dimensions were transformed under colonial and imperial control. The presentation will refer to the ‘spatial turn’ has been especially significant as more and more work addresses the critical importance of materiality and material experience in understanding the distinctiveness of the ocean. At the same time, we have critical interventions by scholars like Tamarra Fernando who stage the agency of non-human actors in understanding the Indian Ocean and have substantively expanded the field by bringing it closer to the challenges that we face in terms of ocean warming and climate emergency. I will also use the occasion to bring these emerging trends in Indian Ocean studies into conversation with Satadru Sen’s pioneering anthropological work on penal settlements in the Andamans with a particular emphasis on the challenges and utility of inter-disciplinary work, and on the need to adopt granular approaches by looking more carefully at islands, bays and creeks that dissolve standardized narratives of a coherent Indian Ocean.

Bio note

Lakshmi Subramanian is Professor of History (Retd.), Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata (CSSS) and the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, BITS, Pilani, Goa. She is Research Fellow in History, at the Institut d’études avancées de Nantes. Her specialization and research expertise lies in the histories of music and censorship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries South Asia, as well as in maritime histories, especially oceanic networks and exchanges in and across the Indian Ocean. Among some of her noteworthy publications are, *The Sovereign and the Pirate, Ordering Maritime Subjects in India’s Western Littoral* (2016), *Three Merchants of Bombay* (2012), *Veena Dhanammal, The Making of a Legend* (2009), *New Mansions for Music Performance, Pedagogy and Criticism* (2009), *From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy* (2006).