



## The Indian Ocean: An archive of history

The Indian Ocean has been of interest to historians for a long time. Powered by the monsoon winds, the Indian Ocean became a hub of trade. Unlike the Atlantic where the winds blow in one direction year-round, the monsoon winds that reverse direction in different seasons powering ships, ensured that the Indian Ocean became the world's oldest long-distance trans-oceanic trading arena. It is often called the cradle of globalization. For thousands of years, this trade formed networks between South Asia, the Middle East, East Africa, Southeast Asia and East Asia.

But along with commercial goods, there was also cultural exchange that happened between the people in these regions. Merchant ships also carried wandering scholars, writers, and thinkers. After the founding of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the Indian Ocean trade routes also became a channel for the spread of Islam. The texts of Islam, Islamic law and other major disciplines were carried by Muslim itinerants from the 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards. So prevalent was this circulation of knowledge, traditions and communities that many scholars referred to the Indian Ocean as the Islamic Sea. Arab, Persian, Indian, Swahili, Malay, Abyssinian and Javanese communities traversed these ocean routes, and shaped the customs and traditions of the people they mingled with on the shores where they made landfall.

Prof. Mahmood Kooria studies the Indian Ocean from the point of view of maritime Islam in the Indian Ocean and specifically the Malabar Coast in the pre- and early-modern eras. This is an area of rich historic significance, with

a long and storied history of trade dating back centuries prior to the arrival of Europeans. Prof. Kooria's research shows how Islamic law and traditions have impacted life in places like southern India. He looks particularly at the Shafi'i school of Muslim jurisprudence (one of four Sunni schools, the others being Hanafi, Maliki, and Hanbali), which is followed by the communities in places like Kerala.

The Shafi'i school named after the jurist Idris al-Shafi from the 8<sup>th</sup> century is particularly interesting for having found its way from the Middle East to places as far away as Mozambique and Indonesia. The spread of Islamic law along these coastal areas and how they influenced communities and legal traditions in these regions forms a significant part of Prof. Kooria's research. He examines in depth the intellectual and cultural history of Shafi'i Islam in the Malabar coast through the debates among Kerala's Muslim jurists, authors, and scholars in the pre- and early modern eras. His book, *Islamic Law in Circulation: Shafi'i Texts Across the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean*, examines a few major works by authors in Kerala in Arabic and Malayalam and provides an analysis of this body of work and its historical significance. Kooria's focus lies not just in Kerala but other areas around the Indian Ocean such as East Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Prof. Kooria's work has huge significance in the historical study of the shaping of socio-economic, legal and political processes across this vast ocean.