ber of dubious estimates of the strengths of various Indian armies) that there were about 600,000 war horses of various kinds in India at the peak in the eighteenth century. On the basis of an annual wastage of ten per cent there would have been a demand for 60,000 replacement horses a year and Gommans values these replacements at 16,500,000 rupees, certainly a significant trade if the figures have any worth. How many of these horses were imported from Central Asia is very uncertain but it is reasonable to argue, as Gommans does, that it was the more valuable horses which were imported and if only 5,000 were brought in annually at 500 rupees each this would represent a sum of 2,500,000 rupees. How much was profit is doubtful: margins were high but so were expenses. It is very evident that a lot of guesses are built into these estimates but they are useful as indicating possible orders of magnitude and suggesting that quite a lot of money passed through the hands of the Afghan horse traders. They are indeed the heroes of the book; Kipling’s Mahbub Ali reminds Gommans irresistibly of the eighteenth century Afghan dealers.

Gommans goes on to argue that a close link existed between the horse traders and the establishment of Afghan-dominated states in India which, he argues, were located along the Afghan horse traders’ routes. Here readers may harbour doubts. The Yusufzays who established themselves in Rohilkhand certainly included horse dealers among their number but they also boasted Sufis and soldiers, those more familiar agents of Muslim expansion in South Asia. And the Bangash of Farrukhabad were not horse traders at all. Mercenary soldiering seems a much more common occupation than horse dealing and the most generous employers and the most handsome pickings were in the Gangetic plain. As for the horse dealers’ routes they went mostly up and down the Gangetic plain like other trade routes.

Chapter 5 and 6 deal with the Rohillas and contain a valuable account of the history and the economy of Rohilkhand in the eighteenth century and also a novel discussion of the ideological basis of the Rohilla state and how the Rohillas sought in various ways to combine Afghan and Muslim elements in their self-image. They are well worth reading.

This is a courageous and colourful book with much of interest about horses and Rohillas. The sceptical scholars will, however, doubt whether the two are brought as closely together as the author would have wished, and will also remain unconvinced by the wider ambitious flights of the book. For those who were led to expect an account of the basis of Durrani power in India the title will remain an aspiration rather than an accomplishment. But no scholar is likely to discuss the topic again without some mention of Afghan horse dealers; Gommans has certainly established them on the eighteenth century Indian historical map.

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The conventions long dominant over the study of its past have been inclined to treat “India” as idiosyncratic, inward-looking and self-contained. Indology has sought to locate the essence of its civilization; anthropology to celebrate the difference of its culture; sociology to freeze its institutions into the static forms of “village community” and “caste”—impervious alike to changes in time and in space. For Western scholars, India has often seemed the last word in the unique, the a-temporal and the autonomous.

Yet—as Edward Said’s Orientalism has reminded us, if we did not know already—such scholarly categorisations, coming from an imperial past, ought to be treated with suspicion.
Moreover, a mere glance at geography might suggest that the presumption of isolation, which these categories require, is inherently implausible. Not only, via its Northern land-routes, has India always been closely connected to Central and Western Asia, but it also possesses one of the highest ratios of coast-line to land mass of any region in the world.

For all the moral objections posed by Hinduism to crossing “the black water,” peoples from India used and travelled the seas for centuries—merchants from the South Indian Chola empire reaching Java; traders from the West coast embedding themselves in the societies of Arabia and the Gulf. Further, peoples from across the seas have also come to India on a regular and extensive basis—Jews and Christians from the Levant; Muslims from the Red and Arabian seas; Armenians from almost everywhere. At least along its coast-lines, Indian society presents a contrasting picture to the rigid and enclosed construct of scholarly imagination. Indeed, looking here one might begin to think that, if this society were unique, it would be for exactly the opposite reasons to those given by convention. It was exceptionally cosmopolitan, pluralistic and fluid—and creative of an open context for cultural as much as material exchange. That 40 per cent of the vocabulary of modern Gujarati should derive from Arabic scarcely bespeaks a cultural history marked by closure.

As Himanshu Prabha Ray remarks elsewhere in this JESHO issue, a “maritime” perspective on India’s history offers a different view to that seen from the land. And the writings gathered in the two works under review contribute very much to the development of that perspective. Over the last thirty years, Sinnapah Arasaratnam—together with Ashin Das Gupta, K.N. Chaudhuri, Michael Pearson, Om Prakash and, more recently, Sanjay Subrahmanyam—has been engaged in exploring the contexts of trade and seafaring along South Asia’s 4000 miles of coastline.

Arasaratnam’s *Maritime Trade, Society and European Influence* consists of a series of essays, previously published but usefully collected from a wide variety of journals. Together with a new essay on Masulipatnam in the volume jointly authored with Aniruddha Ray, they reveal the great qualities of his work. His scholarship is painstaking and meticulous, based largely on scrutiny of the extensive records of the European trading companies (particularly the English Company), who encountered the trading world of South Asia from the sixteenth century onwards.

These records, although indispensable to the task, are by no means easily adapted from their original Euro-centred purposes to the writing of an Indian-focused history. Arasaratnam combs them for occasional threads of insight and information and weaves what he finds into tapestries highlighting indigenous forms of mercantile activity and organisation, ship-building and sea-faring, commodity-producing and -financing. Ray follows in “the master’s” footsteps and, between them, they offer empirically rich accounts of the societies of the south-eastern Coromandel and north-western Gujarat coasts in the early modern period.

The impression that both convey is of extremely sophisticated systems of indigenous banking, trading and artisanal manufacture, but at the same time systems that were vulnerable to extraneous pressures and failed to institutionalise themselves adequately in their social contexts. At their peaks, Masulipatnam and Cambay were the centres of major trans-continental merchandising networks. However, both suffered, on the one side, from hinterland political instabilities and, on the other, from European sea-faring aggression. Both declined into relative insignificance over the course of the eighteenth century. Particular mercantile communities too seem to have come and gone, risen and fallen, with great rapidity—unable to find means of securing their businesses and accumulations from generation to generation. Ultimately, Arasaratnam is inclined to see the world of maritime trade as transient and making only a superficial impact on the societies of the hinterland, to which it was related.

In this, he seems to be seeking to accommodate maritime history to the structures of “land-based” history, particularly as construed by the great historian of Mughal India, Irfan Habib, who introduces the volume written with Aniruddha Ray. What happened on the coasts was marginal to the experience of an essentially agrarian order, whose revenue-extracting imperial mechanisms both obstructed change in the village and periodically wrecked the grander constructions of coastal commerce. Disjunctive “dualisms” always kept the two apart—at least