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Structure and Agency in the World of Indian Ocean Commerce, 1700-1800

Speaker

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Venue

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Abstract:

Keeping the received wisdom on the structure of the Indian Ocean world in view, this talk will take a critical look at the existing theories of cross-cultural trade, diaspora, network, and trust - often underlined in studies explaining the success of long-distance maritime trade of Asian merchants in the early modern period. It analyses the statement of a successful eighteenth-century Armenian merchant regarding his career against the background information on the long-distance trade of Bengal left by an Ostend Company official in the late 1720s and argues that the existing literature, while emphasizing the role of the community in organizing merchant activities, by and large neglects the influence of the structure on the agency. What was this structure like, and how did it impact agency? The pluralist market-towns and ports, an indigenous cosmopolitanism and a thriving money market were a few of the features facilitating trading ventures. Operating in the "field" (Bourdieu 1984), merchants of different origin, Asian and European, could fall back on this structure. Notwithstanding conflicts of interest, cooperation with Europeans was a fallout of this structure, and despite instances of negotiations with Europeans turning sour for the individual Asian merchant, there were always other merchants benefiting from such cooperation.

Sd/-

Simantini Mukhopadhyay

Convenor, Seminar Committee, IDSK