

Omani Ambitions and Maritime Empire: Prof. Seema Alavi's Insightful Lecture at Bangalore International Centre.

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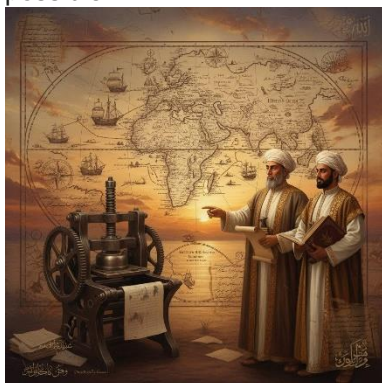
Bangalore

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On Sunday evening, October 12, 2025, Bangalore basked in the charm of a gentle autumn breeze, with the air carrying a faint scent of rain from the previous night. The sky glowed in shades of amber and rose as twilight descended over the city, lending a perfect poetic calm to the evening. It was under this serene backdrop, at the Bangalore International Centre, that I had the privilege of attending the 7th Prof. Satish Chandra Memorial Lecture, delivered by the distinguished historian Prof. Seema Alavi, one of India's foremost scholars of early modern and modern Islamic history. Currently a professor at the University of Delhi, Prof. Alavi is known for her pioneering research on the military, intellectual, and transnational histories of the Muslim world, and for her ability to weave interconnected narratives across the Indian Ocean, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

Satish Chandra (20 November 1922 – 13 October 2017) was an eminent Indian historian whose main area of specialization was medieval Indian history. Through his prolific scholarship and engaging narrative style, he became a towering figure in the study of India's past, inspiring generations of students and researchers. The presence of Alok Chandra, the elder son of Prof. Satish Chandra, added a special resonance to the evening. He graciously introduced Prof. Seema Alavi and offered a brief overview of the Memorial Lectures, underscoring their purpose in carrying forward the intellectual and humanistic legacy of his father.

On a personal note, it was a moment of immense joy for me to be part of this lecture. Dr. Seema Alavi is the daughter of Shariq Alavi, the eminent editor of the Lucknow-based Nadwatul Ulama magazine, "The Fragrance of East". I have been reading Shariq Alavi's writings for a long time and have deeply admired his distinctive literary style and intellectual depth. Knowing that the evening's speaker shared that lineage of thought and expression made the event even more meaningful to me. I must also thank my daughter, Aaliya Jameel, who insisted that we attend this event despite the fear of rain that had nearly convinced me to stay at home. Her gentle persuasion made this memorable evening possible.



Prof. Alavi's lecture, based on her acclaimed work *Sovereigns of the Sea: Omani Ambition in the Age of Empire*, was a masterful exploration of Omani maritime power and its intersections with empire, faith, and trade in the 19th century. She began with a deeply personal note, recalling her student days and how Prof. Satish Chandra's scholarship and narrative brilliance profoundly shaped her intellectual journey. His influence was so inspiring that she decided to dedicate her life to history, abandoning her earlier dream of joining the Indian Administrative Service.

The lecture unfolded as a richly layered narrative of Omani maritime expansion. Beginning with Sultan Sayyid Saeed (Reign 1804 to 1856), Prof. Alavi traced the trajectory of Oman's influence across the Indian Ocean and then carried the audience into the illustrious era of Sultan Sayyid Barghash of Zanzibar (Reign 1870–1888).

Sultan Barghash, she explained, viewed the printing industry not merely as a bureaucratic tool but as

a means of articulating progress and prestige. Under his reign, the printing press became a symbol of intellectual vitality, complementing his ambitious efforts to expand the shipping industry. Prof. Alavi emphasized how these enterprises were central to Barghash's vision of projecting Zanzibar as a modern and sovereign state.

Yet, she reminded the audience that this period was marked by deep paradoxes. Prof. Alavi spoke poignantly about the European hypocrisy surrounding the abolition of slavery. While European powers proclaimed moral opposition to slavery, their economies continued to thrive on the exploitation of enslaved labor in colonies. Zanzibar, as a crucial Indian Ocean hub, found itself caught in this contradiction.

During Sultan Barghash's reign, slavery persisted in two primary forms—agricultural slavery and household slavery. The agricultural slaves toiled on vast clove and coconut plantations, which formed the backbone of Zanzibar's wealth. In contrast, household slavery existed within urban society, where enslaved individuals served in domestic roles, from household management to artisanal crafts. Prof. Alavi carefully explained how Sultan Barghash attempted gradual reforms within this system—seeking to balance humanitarian pressures from British abolitionists with the social and economic realities of his dominion.



Prof. Alavi also devoted insightful attention to the Islamic perspective on slave emancipation. She noted that the Qur'anic injunctions encouraging the freeing of slaves, coupled with traditions of manumission, were given renewed emphasis during Sultan Barghash's reign. While slavery remained entrenched in economic life, she explained, shifts in religious discourse and moral interpretation—partly influenced by broader Muslim debates of the period—led to a slow but perceptible change in attitudes. Under Barghash, public acknowledgement of emancipation's spiritual merit became stronger, opening the way for policies that subtly encouraged liberation within the limits of political and economic feasibility.

Another compelling section of the lecture described Sultan Barghash's extensive travels—from Birmingham and Cairo to Damascus, British colonial Bombay, and Mecca—and how his exposure to these regions shaped his leadership outlook. These journeys, Prof. Alavi noted, allowed him to engage with global modernity while uniting Muslim rulers in response to expanding British influence.

It was fascinating to hear how the Sultan was so captivated by the urban design of Bombay that aspects of Zanzibar's capital were modeled after it. Influences from Gujarat and Kutch also inspired the conception of Dar es Salaam. Among his most celebrated achievements was the establishment of Beit al-Ajaib, or "The House of Wonders"—a grand architectural statement of cultural pride and maritime authority.

Prof. Alavi beautifully concluded that the 19th-century Indian Ocean world was far from peripheral—it was a vibrant arena where Asian Arabs rubbed shoulders with Western powers, shaping diplomacy, commerce, and imperial imagination. She briefly evoked the story of Abdulrazak Gurnah, the Nobel laureate and author of *Paradise*, who fled Oman in the 1960s as a refugee during the Zanzibar Revolution and resettled in Britain, symbolizing the enduring human movements shaped by empire.

The evening concluded with a stimulating Q&A session, where questions flowed passionately across themes of empire, slavery, and maritime identity. By the end, it was difficult to decide which held the greater brilliance—the eloquence of the lecture itself or the spirited intellectual exchange that followed.

Prof. Alavi's lecture was more than a historical recitation; it was a journey across oceans and centuries—a reminder that the sea remains both a witness and a catalyst to the eternal entanglement of power, faith, trade, and memory.