ADVERTISEMENT

The long reach of India

Updated - September 15, 2024 05:14 am IST

In his new book, William Dalrymplesays ancient India had a much larger footprint in the world, exploring its philosophical, religious and scientific influence on Eurasia

MUKUND PADMANABHAN

READ LATER PRINT

Historic trail(Clockwise from right) William Dalrymple; a mural in Ajanta; Buddhist monks at Angkor Wat, Cambodia; and a sketch of Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang in India.(Special arrangement, AP, getty images/istock)

Having written four successful books about the ascent of the East India Company on the back of a weakening Mughal Empire, William Dalrymple turns his attention to ancient and early medieval India to produce a powerful and sweeping account of a land that was once an economic powerhouse, a civilisational cradle and an exporter of merchandise and ideas — philosophical, religious and scientific. To read *The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World* is like opening a magic box — packed with strange and absorbing characters, quirky and almost-forgotten narratives, startling and uncommon facts. Once again, Dalrymple demonstrates that rare ability to use primary historical sources to make places and people come persuasively alive and show that it is possible to write about the past in a way that is at once consequential and extremely engaging. Excerpts from his first interview to an Indian publication:

Continue reading after this ADVERTISEMENT

Question: Authors write about subjects that interest them. But were you also driven, in a way, by the urge to spread your wings, to be known as more than a historian of the East India Company period?

Answer: No, not at all. When I was growing up, I was very much focused on prehistory. My first ever trip to London was to go to the Tutankhamen exhibition. When I first came to India in 1984, I was going around sites like Sanchi and Ajanta. So my teenage self would be very surprised that I ended up focussing most of my professional life on the 18th century, which is way later than anything I was interested in as a kid.

Continue reading after this ADVERTISEMENT

This came back to me very strongly just after I had begun writing *The Anarchy* . I spent a weekend exploring Ajanta. There in caves 9 and 10 were these extraordinary pictures, which I had never seen before. The ASI had cleaned up these two caves which have the earliest Buddhist paintings in existence. Most of Ajanta is about 650 CE. These are 150 BCE. What happened was the Nizam of Hyderabad, who then controlled Ajanta, had brought in Italian conservators who cleaned them but then put on shellac varnish, which almost immediately attracted batshit. And within ten years, the paintings had become completely obscured and were not included in any of the books.

The ASI, about 2014-15, cleaned these up without any fanfare. So I took six months off from *The Anarchy* to write a series of articles about them. Not only were they the oldest Buddhist paintings in the world, but the oldest art since Bhimbetka. They are also the first portrait pictures of Indians. These early pictures are the seed from which wider Buddhist art rose as far away as Japan and eastern China.

Q: But surely you must have realised you were doing more than repositioning India as a cultural and civilisational hub; that you were also repositioning yourself as a historian.

Continue reading after this ADVERTISEMENT

A: It was not a conscious decision. I was just pursuing stuff that interested me. My books take about five years. You have to be madly in love with the subject. And this was a subject that not only provided wonderful reading all the way through COVID, but also spectacular trips in Southeast Asia as well as all the early Buddhist sites in India.

Q: Some of the characters in 'The Golden Road' are not generally well known in India. Was there a sense that you were writing a history that many Indians have forgotten?

A: It isn't only that the characters are not well known. Many Indians don't realise that Angkor Wat was a Vishnu temple. You find Indian tourists astonished to find Kurukshetra and the battle of Lanka depicted on the walls. There's a great deal of very fine Indian scholarship on this. But beyond academic history departments, there's very little in this book that will be familiar to many Indian readers beyond basic starting points like the Buddha and Ashoka.

Continue reading after this ADVERTISEMENT

Hardly anyone has heard of Wu Zetian in India. The same is true of the Barmakids [Buddhist priestly family of Iranian origin] taking Indian Gupta mathematics to Baghdad. I don't think people know that Al-Khwarzimi wrote a book on Hindu mathematics that gets into the hands of Fibonacci.

Q: Is it fair to say that your book is made up of two somewhat separate but interconnected stories? There is the dissemination of Indian philosophical and religious ideas to China and Southeast Asia, and mathematics to West Asia. Then there is this other story, a trading relationship with Rome. Tell us how the two are interconnected.

A: I think it's very much one story. This book is about how India had a much larger footprint in the world than even Indians realise. Yes, Indians are aware that there is this world of Indian science and maths that has not received due recognition. Westerners are simply unaware of this; they think Arabic numbers came from Arabia, full stop.

Continue reading after this ADVERTISEMENT

This is a story of how Indian trade led Indian ideas to spread around the world.

There are two separate concepts in the book. One is the Golden Road (which is the maritime trade network based on the monsoon) and the other is the Indosphere (which is the wider world of Indian ideas and art).

I don't think of them as two distinct bits of the book at all. The whole idea is that this was integrated. Ideas which have often been separated from each other such as the spread of Buddhism and the spread of Sanskrit and the spread of Indian science are all one process. They are part of one extraordinary diffusion of Indian culture which has meant that India is the base of so much of Asian but also world civilisation.

Continue reading after this ADVERTISEMENT

Q: What next?

A: I've got a whole series of ideas. One that I would love to do is a fifth East India Company book around the opium wars. I have discovered a stash of family letters about this. My great grandfather, not on my Dalrymple side, but my maternal one, was an opium trader. I've got a trunk of his letters dealing in China, which will be a very strong new element of the book. And it's a shocking story — the extent to which opium trade enriched not only the East India Company, but many Indians.

I also want to do a family history, particularly of my Franco-Bengali great grandmother Sophia who became a great muse to the pre-Raphaelites. She was the aunt of Virginia Woolf and was part of this whole world of early pre-Raphaelites.

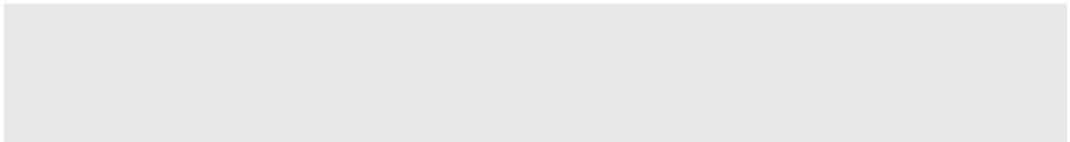
The thing we haven't talked about, the big change in my life, is the podcast. As you know, for a writer to sell 100,000 copies of the book is a major achievement. But the reach of the podcasts that people listen to — when walking the dog, jogging or stuck in traffic jams — is massive. It creates a type of history that didn't exist before. It's a whole new world, and it shows up this huge appetite for history, which people can access in a much more accessible way.

The interviewer teaches philosophy at Krea University and is the author of 'The Great Flap of 1942'.

Published - September 15, 2024 12:00 am IST

READ COMMENTS

READ LATER PRINT



ADVERTISEMENT

Top News Today

THE HINDU

The Hindu
About Us
Code of Editorial Values
News Archive
Sitemap
Print Subscription
Digital Subscription
Subscribe to Newsletters
Rss Feeds
Readers Editor-Terms of Reference
Authors & Contributors
Frame Front page

Contact us
Contact Us
Social Media
Advertise With Us

Group News Sites
Business Line
BL on Campus
Sportstar
Frontline
இந்து தமிழ் திசை
The Hindu Centre
Young World Club
The Hindu ePaper
Business Line ePaper
Crossword + Free Games

Other Products
RoofandFloor
STEP
Images
Classifieds - Print
Bookstore & Special Publications

Popular Sections
Elections
Israeli–Palestinian conflict 2023
Latest News
National News
International News
Videos
Life & Style
Food
Podcast
Showcase

Opinion
Editorial
Columns
Comment
Cartoon
Letters
Interview
Lead

Business
Agri-Business
Industry
Economy
Markets
Budget

Sport

States
Andhra Pradesh
Karnataka
Kerala
Tamil Nadu
Telangana

Cities

Cricket
Football
Hockey
Tennis
Athletics
Motorsport
Races
Other Sports

Sci-Tech

Science
Technology
Health
Agriculture
Environment
Gadgets
Internet

Bengaluru
Chennai
Coimbatore
Delhi
Hyderabad
Kochi
Kolkata
Kozhikode
Madurai
Mangaluru
Mumbai
Puducherry
Thiruvananthapuram
Tiruchirapalli
Vijayawada
Visakhapatnam

Trending on The Hindu

India News
Ayushman Bharat Arogya Yojana scheme
Arvind Kejriwal news
Kolkatta protests LIVE (Sep 12)
Malaika father news
India News
News
Haryana assembly polls
Education News
Japanese jobs for Indians

Trending on Group sites

Stock Market Live Updates
Stocks to buy today
IND vs SL, 1st ODI
Mogun Bagan
Paralympics 2024
Gold Rate Today
Silver Rate Today
Explore Frontline Packages
Centre is diluting federalism
Frontline Current Issue

TERMS OF USE / PRIVACY POLICY /

Copyright© 2024, THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD. or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.

BACK TO TOP