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The Indocentric Road Taken

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An ode to a “forgotten” India which needs to be given its rightful place in a Euro-American-centric globe ends up replacing one form of cultural supremacy with another. The obsession with an original centre of intellectual genius ignores cross-cultural exchanges and knowledge produced out of labour.

Before Google Search, there was *Tell Me Why*. Author Arkady Leokum’s multi-volume American book series of that title, inaugurated in the 1960s, was a compilation of easy-to-understand answers to a large number of questions about the world. For decades the series was a common and reliable resource to many children and parents in the English-speaking world, who might have wanted to know “Why does the tiger have stripes?” or “How did the calendar begin?”

In the late 1990s, by a stroke of luck, a consolidated volume titled *The Big Book of Tell Me Why* entered my life when I was about 12. It was a thick tome – 600 pages chock-full with that intoxicating thing called knowledge – and I consulted it almost every day for years thereafter. Today, the book’s contents are a distant memory for me, but there is one thing I still vividly remember: the thrill I’d experience whenever I encountered a mention of India in its pages. That feeling was really something else, a kind of innate childhood euphoria triggered by praise for “my” country and its people, especially its scientific past, in a glossy “international” book.

The world has come a long way since the 1990s. Folks across the world can access far more than just scattered tidbits and cursory references to Indian ideas and intellectual achievements. Especially so this year, with the release of William Dalrymple’s book *The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World*, which bills itself as a comprehensive, magisterial story of India’s “often forgotten position as a [...] civilisational engine at the heart of the ancient and early medieval worlds.”

My 1990s self would have found Dalrymple’s aims of focusing fully on the Indian story, and enlightening a still largely Euro-American-centric world about the arts, cultures, and sciences of people from the subcontinent, highly exciting.

But in 2024, I am a child no more, and having read the book now as a scholar, I feel ambivalent about the ways in which Dalrymple has chosen to narrate the “Indian” story. Take, for instance, an emblematic statement on the first millennium CE, when, Dalrymple writes: “Indian religions, philosophies and sciences spread out in all directions across the Indosphere, like the shifting rays of a Sanskrit sun that sometimes penetrated surprisingly deeply into far distant recesses of the world around it.”

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Those are some striking statements about what the author terms the “Indosphere” and the “Sanskritic sun”. Historians of science will be quick to recognise the parallels between “Indian” philosophies and sciences “spreading out” to distant recesses of the world, and the much-critiqued framework of “Western” science “diffusing out” to the global “periphery,” proposed in 1967 in a well-known *Science* article. Furthermore, historians of South Asia who are cognisant of the centrality of caste in the region’s past and present, will no doubt cringe at the reduction of the majestic diversity of the subcontinent’s religions, philosophies and sciences, as well as languages, into a singular “Sanskritic” sun.

Finally, many scholars will exasperatedly recognise in that quote yet another instance of the ahistorical shrinking of the South Asian rainbow of peoples and cultures into the hackneyed “India” monochrome. Dalrymple presents this book as his ode to a “forgotten” India which needs to be given its rightful place in a Euro-American-centric globe. But by describing that place to be the very centre of the premodern world, he ends up simply replacing one form of cultural and technoscientific supremacy with another.

Knowledge of the head and of the hand

The Marathi author P.L. Deshpande was known for writing up biographical sketches of the striking individuals he would now and then encounter. One such personality was an elderly Parsi man, [Pestonji Hubliwala](#). Starting as a worker in a railway workshop in late colonial India, Pestonji retired as an assistant foreman after three decades of diligent service. During his conversation (probably in the

1970s), with PL –as Deshpande was better known in literary circles as –the retired foreman wistfully recollected his work with the railway department, contrasting the colonial period with the post-independence era. PL labelled this, in jest, as the yearning of a generation of older Parsis for the “good old British days,” but his reproduction of Pestonji’s thoughts are telling. “In the railway workshop my white engineer bosses never thought twice before taking off their coats and shirts and getting their hands dirty on engines that needed repairs. But the engineers nowadays, all these Subramaniam and Joshis and Kulkarnis.. I tell you ... They are so scared to get their hands dirty. They have zero practical experience, these silly bespectacled fellows!”

It is unlikely that Pestonji was well-versed in radical anti-caste critique, but his observation about South Asia’s elite caste groups (“Subramaniam,” etc) religiously keeping their distance from manual labour is a historical reality. Equally true is how the elite everywhere write themselves into histories of knowledge to the exclusion of expertise produced by the non-elite. The historian Patricia Fara contrasts ancient Greece’s “wealthy philosophers who thought profoundly about the Universe,” like Archimedes, with the “far greater number of people from lower social orders” that have largely been forgotten. Many aspects of knowledge-making and science, Fara says, originated from the latter groups: these were “people who used their expertise to keep themselves alive–miners who developed ore-refining techniques, farmers familiar with weather patterns, textile workers who relied on chemical reactions.” For South Asia, Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd distinguishes the privileged caste groups from the “productive castes”: “the Dalit–Bahujan masses” who established technologies like “leather processing, pot making, house construction technology and the technologies of food production, based on trial and error in their struggle for survival.”

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In *The Golden Road*, it is Pestonji’s “bespectacled” version of science that predominates, one where science is primarily a theoretical enterprise carried out by people poring over manuscripts and books with little need for the practical experience of getting one’s hands dirty. The knowledge-makers Dalrymple chooses to typify as unknown and forgotten stars of South Asia are not the highly skilled and consistently neglected pot-makers or farmers, but the very ubiquitous Archimedes’ of the subcontinent: the Aryabhata and Brahmaguptas. Considering the kinds of “literature, arts and the sciences” that occupy the bulk of this book, one might well come away believing that it was only Brahmans and adjacent privileged-caste groups who had the ability to conceptualise and create anything of value in South Asia.

To be sure, the kinds of pursuits that Dalrymple writes about, primarily maths and astronomy, are not trivial. However, an overwhelming focus on such a handful of sciences, recorded in some or the other form of writing mostly in Sanskrit, inadvertently ends up dismissing as trivial the numerous other forms of making knowledge and doing science that dotted the premodern South Asian world.

Such implicit bias in favour of “the knowledge of the head over that of the hand” – not that the latter is ever divorced from intellectual analysis – is a persistent problem in how histories of science have conventionally been imagined. It is the reason why for a long time women were mostly absent as actors in historical accounts of science and medicine, despite being skilled frontline healers and nurturing a tremendous repository of medical knowledge. It is also the reason why the majority of South Asia’s people and communities – the “lower”-caste and “untouchable” Bahujans and Adivasis – are either a marginalised minority or completely absent in the region’s science histories: including, unfortunately, in *The Golden Road*.

There is one tantalising moment when Dalrymple acknowledges what he considers the overwhelming visibility of Brahmans among the subcontinent’s immigrants to Southeast Asia, and notes that “many other non-literate Indian caste groups were also present and may have been predominant.” However, this potentially exciting analysis of the “varied diaspora rather than just the boatloads of literate Brahmins” is only a page long, based mostly on a DNA-based study. More disappointingly, after making such a crucial revelation about the predominance of Bahujan caste groups in the diaspora, Dalrymple jumps right back into the Brahmanosphere: “Whatever their DNA contribution to the region, the Brahmins did bring with them from India three crucial gifts that proved irresistible right across the region: Sanskrit, the art of writing and the stories of the great Indian epics.” That Sanskrit was a language only of the elites with its exclusivity strictly enforced, and that the epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana prescribed violent actions in order to protect and pursue a caste-based social order, are contexts within South Asia that remain unexamined..

But these contexts are indispensable to in *The Golden Road's* major themes, because when we account for the fact that the prejudices and oppressive laws of Sanskrit-literate elites were central to how “literature, arts, and the sciences” operated in the subcontinent, then the book’s major bold claim, that “Indian” influence across Asia was spread “not by the sword but by the sheer power of its ideas”, loses much of its sheen.

One-way traffic

For decades now, scholars have worked hard to lay to rest earlier ways of writing history, wherein one group of people would be portrayed as a docile, passive recipient of some other group’s “superior” ideas and materials. A pertinent example is the so-called civilising mission of European colonists: both colonisers and sympathetic Euro-American scholars loved to proclaim that colonised Asian and African people were grateful recipients of Western science, medicine, democracy and so on. Thankfully, over time, more rigorous scholars have painstakingly worked to show that entities like “Western science” are less Western or European and more [global](#) in character. They have taught us that a fuller historical picture of interactions between different cultures can be grasped not through a one-way transfer or “diffusion” framework, but only when we carefully “[peel](#) apart the onion layers of resistance, accommodation, participation, and appropriation” engaged in by the involved parties.

Even though Dalrymple on occasion alludes to the presence of multi-way exchanges, even disinterest in some South Asian ideas, the evidence is eventually left out of his main thesis of Indocentrism.

The Golden Road, unfortunately, bypasses these decades-old trends in historical analysis. It throws light on earlier major blindspots in how South Asian history is generally imagined across the world, but it also itself overlooks a large amount of relevant historical evidence and argumentation that’s been around for decades.

The glowing Eurocentric accounts of past historians are replaced in this book by a modest but nevertheless definitive Indocentrism: “India [...] set the template for the way much of the world would think and express itself, and would significantly alter the trajectory of the history of a great swathe of mankind. For more than a thousand years it was a garden that issued the seeds that, once planted elsewhere, flowered in new, rich and unexpected ways.” There are few layers of nuance in the book’s luscious servings of arguments, particularly when it comes to interactions of South Asians with people from Southeast Asia and the Arabic world. Even though Dalrymple on occasion alludes to the presence of multi-way exchanges, even disinterest in some South Asian ideas, the evidence is eventually left out of his main thesis of Indocentrism. He notes that casteism and “ideas of ritual impurity and elaborate bans on eating with members of different castes” were rejected by the communities in Southeast Asia, and specifically in Cambodia, women remained owners and disposers of property, “something from which the wider Indian Brahmanical tradition excluded them.” But these ideas are not followed through, and *The Golden Road* remains largely about a one-way traffic of ideas and materials out of “India”.

Standing on the shoulders of others while offering them one

If we take the Indocentrism with a fistful of salt, *The Golden Road* is a great, eminently readable book. My hope is that it will be the last of the great books in its genre.

There is, after all, a fatal weakness in the voluminous oeuvre of one-way traffic works that extol a single civilisation and how it supposedly changed the world: they all overlook the fact that a culture, and the world around it, are not mutually exclusive but instead are constantly shaping and co-creating each other. In the case of *The Golden Road*, it means that most instances of the “literature, arts and the sciences” the author describes as “Indian” gifts to foreign lands, might have geographically appeared first within the subcontinent, but conceptually they can hardly be pinned down to a single geography or “civilisation”. Mark Twain’s [assertion](#) that “when a great orator makes a great speech you are [actually] listening to ten centuries and ten thousand men” captures this point forcefully on a human scale.

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To learn how such exchanges and co-creation pan out on the “civilisational” scale we only need to look at the work of scholar Sheldon Pollock, whose book on Sanskrit is, as it turns out, cited liberally by Dalrymple in *The Golden Road*.

If we take a proper historical view, Pollock writes, “civilizations reveal themselves to be processes and not things. And as processes they ultimately have no boundaries; people are constantly receiving and passing on cultural goods.” Food is a good example to help us wrap our heads around this processes not things idea: none of the cuisines of South Asia has ever been a single particular thing frozen in time, but has always been in a flux – like a process – made and remade unceasingly as people “constantly received and passed on” ingredients, recipes, and secrets, including from outside the region. “Indian civilisation” or “South Asian civilisation” also, similarly, is not some unchanging thing which from atop Mount Meru transmitted its bounties to other cultures. Instead, it has been a part of the always global “networks of begging, borrowing, and stealing, imitating and emulating” in which all cultures and civilisations have participated. What we overlook when we speak about the “Indianization” of Southeast Asia, Pollock perceptively argues, is that it was “concurrent with, and no different from, the Indianization of India itself”, with the latter taking place often via ideas and materials from, well, Southeast Asia.

Once we realise that civilisations and cultures are always mutually shaping and co-making each other, as against engaging in simple give-and-take transactions, it becomes clear that the big ideas and developments which we tend to attribute to specific civilisations, are in reality multi-causal and multi-origin. This fundamental awareness then helps us graduate from, for example, the parochial task of asking 'Who first “gave” the concept of zero to the world', to the adventure of exploring what global and local conditions, including prior forms of knowledge, came together for certain people in South Asia in a certain time period, that they then went on to conceptualise the particular idea of zero. Such a plea to abandon our obsession with credit is not a new idea. To quote Twain again, “It takes a thousand men to invent a telegraph or a steam engine... or any other important thing – [but] the last man gets the credit and we forget the others.”

The Golden Road is earnestly invested in giving civilisational credit to the last man. There is enough finely-narrated history in it to alert the careful reader to the existence of the previous thousand folks, with the voluminous notes and bibliography even directing us to where their stories can be discovered.

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