



## Book Review

### The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World

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**William Dalrymple**, *The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World*, India, Bloomsbury, 2024, Pages 496, ISBN: 9781408864418

In his sweeping, meticulously researched *The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World*, William Dalrymple tracks how the Indian subcontinent transformed global history. Over the centuries, it has been an ambitious effort to follow India's contribution to philosophy and religion, science and mathematics, trade and culture, all delivered in the characteristic style of storytelling, which has almost become Dalrymple's hallmark. In a way, it is simultaneously a rediscovery of a past overpowered by colonial narratives, an attractive argument on the centrality of India in the ancient world order.

The heart of the *Golden Road* is a story of the "indigenous millennium" from about 250 BCE to 1200 CE, when Indian influence covered large parts of the world. For Dalrymple, it was in this period that an "Indosphere" emerged- a cultural and intellectual space that reached from the Roman Empire in the west to China, Korea, and Japan in the east. Indian merchants, monks, and scholars exchanged wares, ideas, and philosophies through the twin engines of maritime trade and religious proselytisation, transforming the world around them.

The book begins with a rich account of India's economic leadership in the Roman Empire. The Roman historian Pliny the Elder bemoans the massive outflow of gold and silver to India to pay for such luxuries as muslins, spices, gems, and ivory. The depiction of this trade, in which Indian flavouring of peppery pepper enlivened meals as far north as Hadrian's Wall and Roman nobles wore jewellery made of Indian gems, portrays India as economically dominant. Indian museums, the book notes, hoard more Roman coins than any country other than the ex-imperial republic, an assertion of the centrality of the subcontinent in old global trade.

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The Golden Road further explores Indian export as the “spiritual and intellectual superpower”. Born in India, Buddhism took central stage across the Asian cultures. Countries like China, Japan, and Korea owed much of their cultural and religious life to it. Dalrymple brings alive the story of Xuanzang, the Chinese monk whose 7th-century journey to India meant the transmission of Indian Buddhist texts to China and formed the nucleus of Chinese Buddhism. Xuanzang’s writings are, therefore, invaluable sources regarding the cultural and intellectual landscape of the subcontinent.

Dalrymple also charts the diffusion of Hinduism and Sanskrit culture to Southeast Asia. From the world’s largest Hindu temple at Cambodia’s Angkor Wat to the Tamil-influenced royal courts of Vietnam and Indonesia, the book shows how Indian ideas were assimilated and adapted by diverse cultures. Sanskrit became the language of prestige and power, and Indian epics such as the Ramayana took root and evolved into regional masterpieces across Asia.

The most fascinating parts of the book are those in which Indian, Hellenistic, and Persian knowledge systems interact during the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad. Indian manuscripts on mathematics, astronomy, and medicine were translated into Arabic, setting the stage for the European Renaissance centuries later. Dalrymple recounts how Indian numerals, adopted by Arab scholars, revolutionised mathematics, eventually replacing Roman numerals in Europe. The narrative effortlessly interlocks anecdotes of Indian physicians, astrologers, and scholars who left their footprints on the Islamic world.

One central theme that goes through The Golden Road is maritime trade, the hallmark of India’s global power. Dalrymple portrays the busy Indian ports in history, where commerce traded from the smallest commodity, such as a spice or even a piece of cloth, to religious ideas and philosophical conceptions. In the book’s narrative, Cholas appear very prominently, because India’s maritime empire under the Cholas involved several reportedly naval expeditions, which could be attributed more towards commerce and cultural exchange. In this light, the author establishes that it was an influence that Southeast Asia witnessed, rather than a conquest from Indian culture, its soft power at work.

Dalrymple’s narrative is grounded in rigorous, multi-disciplinary research that validates his portrayal of ancient India’s global influence. He spent over five years conducting fieldwork across India, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, visiting archaeological sites, studying temple inscriptions, and consulting multilingual manuscripts. His methodology combines close reading of primary sources such as Sanskrit, Pali, Arabic, and Chinese texts with the study of material culture, including Tamil Brahmi inscriptions, Roman coin hoards, ancient maritime logs like the Muziris Papyrus, and

sculptural remains. He draws from an expansive array of archival sources and integrates travelogues such as those of Xuanzang to construct a detailed picture of cultural exchange across the Indian Ocean world. This triangulation of literary, material, and visual sources allows Dalrymple to substantiate the book's central idea that India's historical role was not peripheral but profoundly central in shaping global civilisation. The Golden Road is critical because it fills essential gaps in dominant historical narratives. At the same time, much of traditional world history has focused on the overland Silk Road and Greco-Roman paradigms. Dalrymple foregrounds India's maritime networks as crucial trade and religion, philosophy, science, and art conduits. By reorienting the lens to highlight oceanic routes, Dalrymple offers a corrective to Eurocentric historiography and brings into focus a dynamic and interconnected "Indosphere." He brings to light evidence such as a 2nd-century Buddha statue discovered at the Red Sea port of Berenike, and Tamil merchant guilds and monasteries in Central Asia, which testify to the long-distance reach of Indian culture. The presence of Indian epics like the Ramayana across Southeast Asian courts, or the transmission of Indian numerals to the Abbasid Caliphate and eventually Europe, is shown not just as abstract ideas, but as outcomes of deeply embedded networks supported by verifiable material and textual evidence. With nearly 100 pages of notes and bibliography, Dalrymple's work is not just narrative history; it is a well-substantiated intervention that addresses long-neglected dimensions of India's global past.

Dalrymple's journey into trade is full of surprises- such as Tamil monasteries in Uzbekistan and a Buddha statue found in an Egyptian temple. Such discoveries reveal how Indian merchants' networks spread to far-flung places and how Indian culture left its mark in remote areas.

Dalrymple is best when he weaves scholarship into personal reflection. His accounts of ancient temples, sculptures, and manuscripts are the most vivid descriptions, bespeaking a love for India's rich cultural heritage. The book is as much a historical treatise as a love letter to a lost world of syncretism and interconnectedness. In earlier books such as *White Mughals* and *The Anarchy*, he is quite a skilled weaver of history, and now continues his craft on a more gigantic scale with *The Golden Road*.

While the book is undeniably ambitious, it does not shy away from acknowledging its limitations. Dalrymple admits that the sheer scope of the subject leaves room for scholarly debate. For instance, his claim that the zero was a uniquely Indian invention may draw criticism from some quarters, as might specific historical details. Yet these minor quibbles do little to detract from the book's overall impact.

The Golden Road is also a corrective to the Eurocentric narratives that have dominated world history for far too long. Dalrymple writes that Modern India has failed to tell its ancient story well, to itself and the world. The research here is meticulous and the prose engaging, all of which redresses this imbalance and gives readers a fuller understanding of India's historical contributions.

The book extracts a poignant lesson from history in its closing pages. Dalrymple believes India was at its creative and influential best when it was open, pluralistic, and receptive to new ideas. That message is aptly delivered amidst ancient India's interconnectedness today.

The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World is a triumph of historical storytelling. Vibrant prose, assiduous research, and a sweeping narrative are wrapped up in this book that will reclaim India's rightful place at the centre of the ancient world. It is a must-read for any interested individual in history, culture, and the long-lasting effects of ideas. For Dalrymple, this is the writing of a masterpiece and a guideline to comprehend interconnected human civilisations. This book reminds readers that history is not just a random string of dates and events but a living, breathing tapestry of shared experiences and mutual influence.