

**William Dalrymple: *The Golden Road: How
Ancient India Transformed the World.*
Bloomsbury, 2024**

Anjali Verma

The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World by William Dalrymple is a new addition in his scholarly acumen beyond his previous works majorly on Mughals to East India Company through *White Mughals* (2002) and *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi 1857* (2006), *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company* (2019) that told a story what happened after early medieval period up to colonial era in Indian history. *The Golden Road* has tried to complete the circle in opposite direction by going to ancient world history and bringing India back into the centre through Buddhism and Maritime trade.

Divided into ten chapters, excluding Introduction that works as Preface, book seems to be majorly divided into two tangents: religion and economy with Buddhism and maritime trade activities of south India as main themes throughout. Taking fancy from Greek and Chinese travellers, initial pages open up on Indosphere, the term coined by the American linguist James Matisoff. The very first chapter titled as *The Gale of Stillness* remains focused on the development of Buddhism from its origin to spread through various sources and interpretations. Ashoka appears as zealous leader committed to spread Buddhism to farthest corner of his reach or he knew. Kanishka on the other hand remains overshadowed by the economy of south India when it comes to Mahayana.

Next two chapters are devoted to economic deal of various commodities of export to different countries through trading ports of south, port cities, merchants, and guilds. It speaks about how it connected the world to India or vice-versa culturally besides economy. It also emphasis how the fancy for gold in India

Dr. Anajali Verma, Assistant Professor, Deptment of History, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla, Himachal Pradesh--171005.

remained a historical truth from ancient past. It never leaves the sight/references of monasteries that runs parallel with narratives on monks, kings and Nalanda. To the destruction of Nalanda, Dalrymple, takes it a processual case from Brahmanical jealousy leading finally to Turks.

Tracing the journey of Buddhism from India to China and its influence on Empress Wu provides interesting insight into Chinese patriarchal and religious court world. On Taoism and Confucianism, Dalrymple parallel take forms an interesting triangle in Chinese philosophical debates. His examination of rising Pallava power under kings Mahendravarman and Narasimhavarman and the rise of cities like Mamallapuram, Nagapattinam and Kanchipuram (re-rise) along with fall of Western Roman Empire actually seems to be connecting in backdrop of the downfall of cities in northern India during feudal age along with declining trade and cities worldwide.

Coming to half way of *The Golden Road*, on the one hand Dalrymple speaks about the religious and economic developments in India, (majorly south of India), simultaneously hinted that aspects like caste hierarchy and status of women in Indian context could not exert any influence on society and history of South East Asia. He rather refuted the claim that all Indian knowledge system travelled through brahmins only in the light of new DNA evidences study on Angkor Borei. Both, his chapters '*The Diaspora of the Gods*' and '*He Who is protected by the Sun*' has presented varied dimensions of travel of religious faith in South East Asian.

While discussing how these developments affected religious and somewhere political landscapes of Southeast Asia from Java, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar to Vietnam, William has given greater admiration to architectural marvels of Hinduism than political imperialism that travelled through Chola father-son duo, Rajaraja and Rajendra Chola. He speaks about 240 temples of Prambanan in Java depicting stories of *Ramayana*. He throws light

on arrival of Pashupats and influence of Shaiva in Cambodia as well showing travel of Shaiva influence. The epoch of Chola polity and its territorial expansion has been highlighted with the fact of the challenge posed by kings of Srivijaya to Chola and Khmers alliance that had much to do with Chinese polity.

'The Treasure of the Books of Wisdom' takes us to inventions, discoveries, scientific minds and Indian ideas of wisdom through Aryabhata, Brahmgupta. It lands this journey to the Arab world with huge time gap which seems a void actually. 664 CE Dalrymple claimed to be the moment that Indosphere reached peak of its influence through its main champions who remained unsung heroes; massacred monks and vanished merchants and their grandeur. It seems that the scholars of Nalanda migrated from ancient past of Buddhism to modern Christians in Oxford and Cambridge through Indo-Arabic numerals. Numbers also travelled through *Aryabhattiyam* to *The Book of Calculation*.

Only in the final pages does Dalrymple acknowledged the debates about Indian history that seems to be a hurried attempt actually or at least needed a detail argument. Also, maritime route's significance has been pointed out by several historians working on maritime history of India in past as well. Rather somewhere seems to be lost in Xuan Zang's travels in search on Buddhist philosophical narratives than Chinese trade. The *Golden Road's* last ten pages seem to be a hint of Dalrymple's next work that can be fulfilling the gap from Delhi Sultanate to Mughals and their decline where the circle with *White Mughals* seems to be completed. Next hundred pages are dedicated to Notes, followed by next hundred with extensive bibliography, more than hundred people on acknowledgement list and finally index.

Thus, a 479 comprehensive page study stretched for almost a millennium and a half, Dalrymple has painted a historical canvass amalgamating several factors of religion, polity and economy in Indian and South-east Asian context. While recounting the flourishing trade between ancient India (especially south) and the Roman Empire (with reference of Pliny the Elder's cry for India as

“the sink of the world’s most precious metal”), he does not forget to mention the famous Battle of Alexandria in 30BC, which paved a way to put a control over the Red Sea by Romans. Also his lucid narratives dealing with extravagant Indian trade of exotic spices, gemstones, cotton, elephant tusks, tortoise shells and several other items that were shipped straight from the south Indian coast to the Italian mainland via Egypt present a vivid picture of travelling convoys and ships. He persuasively argues that maritime trade route from India preceded the overland Silk Road connecting China, Turkey and the Mediterranean Sea by several centuries but on Kushan and Indo-Bactrian trade, his argument and page limit does not refute the route map created on silk route but surely presents just a qualifying research on German term *Seidenstrabe*, the silk road (popularized in 1877 by Ferdinand von Richthofen). It needed more expansion of the theme to bring Silk of China on the Roads/sea leading through India.

The story-telling in *The Golden Road* on religion and economy that runs parallel to the story of stretched influence through art, music, technology, astronomy, dance, literature, mathematics and architecture successfully captures the attention of the reader. Book keeps reminding us time and again about ‘Indosphere’ the influencing zones of Indian culture, religion and economy beyond boundaries. This sphere of influence, touching more than half of the world’s population, reached from the Red Sea in the west to the Pacific Ocean in the east. Its narratives from past to present creates a vivid picture of a world deeply intertwined with Indian commodities, Buddhism, Hinduism, philosophy, and architectural principles. But question still remains whether India was a champion of the world or at least South-east Asia in terms of religious and economic influence?

This book serves as a testimony to the travel of religion, economy of commodities, and power of cultural diffusion that transcended in architecture and language. Even the challenge to silk route which this book offers in limited scope through its source based arguments certainly provides readers a delightful fresh perspectives on civilizations, might and fight, and presence in the

economy. It is a meticulously researched work based upon varied sources and certainly speaks louder than previous works available on India's presence in the ancient World. In *The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World*, the involvement of thinking, connecting the dots through source-based study and presenting a vivid picture of ancient Indian from past to almost early medieval period seems to be a successful attempt taken by Dalrymple that he could do in best possible way of narrating a story differently and bringing world back to India.