

Book Review

Jagjeet Lally, *India and the Silk Roads. A History of a Trading World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. xv + 414. \$74.00. (hardcover)

Jagjeet Lally's *India and the Silk Roads. A History of a Trading World* promises a very large topic and it does indeed deliver on that promise with a text filled with detail and framed in the appropriate historiography. This is an impressive book which has its origins in the author's Cambridge dissertation.

'The Silk Road' is a metaphor for a land-based trade system that existed over the centuries, along which merchants with their caravans transported items from Europe to China and vice versa. While the trade route consisted of many more commodities than silk, and was not really a 'road,' the metaphor has proved to be very useful for the conceptualization of pre-modern commerce and as a pedagogical tool in the classroom. Of course, the paradigm is also reductionist, misrepresents many attributes of the trade system, and serves a political function. The English-language phrase is only about a century old, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, appearing in texts as the British Empire was on the verge of losing its important colonial territory in South Asia. A traditional representation of 'the road' was that it began to fade in importance with the establishment of early modern sea routes, or, more to the point, "the world of the caravan trade has been sucked into the abyss of the 'colonial transition'" (7).

Jagjeet Lally argues for a different approach and his centering of the South Asian perspective helps to decolonize the historical interpretation of the subject. He cites the works of "Stephen F. Dale (1994), Claude Markovits (2000), and Scott C. Levi (2002)" as the intellectual "point of departure" of his analysis (7). His pluralization of 'roads' points to the author's objective to add complexity to the representation of the exchange system and to provide space beyond the two typically spotlighted terminal points of the trade: China and Europe. The result is a study that examines numerous trading sites that participated in the ancient, medieval, and early modern land-trade, although Lally's focus is thoroughly early modern, especially the long eighteenth century. The book "not

only argues that the political changes ...[of the era]... were transformative while being broadly positive for trade and the societies connected through long-distance exchange, but the caravan trade is integral to understanding some of the reconfigurations of power that took place in this period” (8). This is the thesis, but Lally’s study also demonstrates the connectiveness created by merchants and traders frequently crossing political and cultural boundaries that generated wealth and formed identities (257).

This is not the first time that plural ‘roads’ has appeared in a book title, but Lally’s focus is fundamentally historical, seeking to document the existence and changes of trade between Northern India and Central Asia, and he offers a breathtaking pedigree of research conducted at Cambridge, Lahore, Delhi, Mumbai (he uses Bombay), Chandigarh, London, and Multan. This global research program demonstrates Lally’s goal to write a more global analysis. Academics should already be aware of this regional connection to the Euro-Asian trade system, and one suspects that in Central and South Asian cultures, it might occupy a prominent spot in the hierarchy of cultural literacy. But what is common knowledge in South Asia becomes more obscure in the classrooms of, say, North America, for example, where the goods of East Asia and Europe most likely dominate lectures. There are exceptions, of course, and Janet L. Abu-Lughod’s *Before European Hegemony* (1989) offered a college-classroom appropriate text that explored the complexity of the trade system as the Euro-Asian world was beginning to experience the fourteenth-century plague. Abu-Lughod’s eight regional interlocking trading spheres certainly added complexity to the pre-modern trade system and extended that system into many areas of Europe, Asia, and Africa. So Lally’s approach has precedent, but he refines it, adds much that is innovative, supports it with his impressive research, and details transformative social, political, and economic organizations located especially in Northern India.

The first chapter is entitled “Environment,” and demonstrates the author’s ability to deal with the Annalist tradition, environmental history, and world history (he cites Fernand Braudel, William Neill, and Geoffrey Parker, among others). He demonstrates how climate fluctuations, usually labelled ‘The Little Ice Age’ in European history, had various manifestations in other parts of the world and influenced established systems of power and trade. While ruling dynasties might be toppled, the more fundamental result was to change the sorts of commodities that people in Central and South Asia could afford to produce and send off to market. So, for example, by the late eighteenth century, Bengal had become a key location in British oceanic trade while Multan had become key to caravan trade (71). This model undermines an older view of an ancient and mostly unchanging caravan trade system that failed in competition with the European, and mostly British, dominated ocean trade that established access to new global markets.

Chapter 2 deals with “Exchanges”; chapter 3 focuses on “Power”; and chapter 4 on “Traders.” The eighteenth century witnessed the lessening of Safavid and Mughal

power, which created space for the subsequent rise of the political and economic power of several Afghani and Punjabi regions. Punjabi weavers produced silk thread and fabric, while Punjabi traders traveled far and wide; meanwhile Bombay exported silk into the British oceanic trade system, while the silk industry of Calcutta declined (63-4). The power to the north afforded Sikh-Punjabi rulers and tradesmen the opportunity to ally politically and trade with partners sometimes in the Afghani region and sometimes in Central Asia, which meant working with Afghans as trade partners (95). The traders' networks of partners were requisite to the system, and the focus—especially of chapter 4. Lally provides the impressive example of a trade network that connected folks in Kabul, Katta-Kurgan, Karshi, Kulob, Charju, Urgench, Tashkurgan, and Yarkand (109).

Chapters 5 and 6 deal with “Material Culture” and “Colonial Conquest.” After a discussion of self-fashioning and globalization of markets, Lally moves on to an examination of consumption (or the demand) for specific commodities in South Asia, including certain texts, horses (creating a link between *ghazis* and horse breeders), cotton cloth, and dyes. By the nineteenth-century, British colonial officials also sought to push trade routes into areas of Central Asia.

With the final two chapters, entitled “Knowledge” and “Technology,” the focus continues to be nineteenth century. The system was complex. “A reputable trader or traveller in need of cash in Bukhara or Samarkand could draw credit from Multani or Peshawari banking houses..., for example, the sum settled at a later date at one of their ‘branches’” (179). Colonial governments sought to document and track the movement of commodities. It was also the era of steam engines, rail travel and shipping, and telegraph communications (217), and this fact empowered traders to move with more speed and political systems to spread their control.

India and the Silk Roads stands as a corrective to studies that focus exclusively on the construction of European-dominated shipping-based trade systems. The inclusion of Indian markets into a more global system remains, but the system was frequently land trade with other South Asians or with traders in Central Asia. The focus on Indo-Afghan-Central Asian traders keeps the attention of the reader on indigenous actions and agency. This book is both detailed and encyclopedic in its breadth and scope. These are the biggest strengths of the study and also its greatest weakness. The ability of the author to gather, master, order, and construct an argument from this vast amount of information is impressive. The result, however, is the vast amount of information may overwhelm the reader. I would hesitate to recommend the book to an undergraduate, but graduate students and above will profit tremendously. Lally's scholarship will leave us with a more nuanced and informed understanding of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century India and its participation in global trade systems.

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