

Global India circa 100 CE: South Asia in Early World History

A Brief Interview with Richard H. Davis



Richard H. Davis is Professor of Religion and Asian Studies at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. Previously he taught at Yale University. He is the author of *Ritual in an Oscillating Universe: Worshiping Siva in Medieval India* (Princeton University Press, 1991), *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton University Press, 1997), and *A Priest's Guide to the Great Festival: Aghorasiva's Mahotsavavidhi* (Oxford University Press, 2010). He was the winner of the 1999 Association for Asian Studies (AAS) Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy Book Prize. He has served in several capacities with AAS—as a member of the AAS South Asia Council, and as an Associate Editor for *The Journal for Asian Studies*. He is currently working on a cultural history of early South Asia and on a study of the history of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Lucien: *I remember when I invited you to submit a KIAS proposal on Early South Asia in World History, you readily accepted the offer. What are some reasons you think a booklet on this topic is needed for lower-level university and advanced high school students?*

Richard Davis: I have been teaching a 200-level course on Early Indian History at Bard College for a number of years, and I quickly agreed to your proposal because I saw it as a chance to develop some new materials and a new approach to those materials for my class. Along the way, if I could write something that would be of use to other teachers in similar situations, so much the better.

In a way, I wanted to argue against the course I had been teaching. I found that I was presenting South Asian society and culture as a self-contained civilizational unit. There are old clichés that support this viewpoint: traditional Indians feared the “pollution” of others, they did not want to cross the “black waters,” and the like. I knew that wasn’t true, but I had unwittingly come to present South Asian history that way myself. Students would ask me questions about Alexander of Macedonia’s campaign, or about the spread of Buddhism into China and Southeast Asia, that indicated they also were curious about ties between South Asia and other world regions. So I felt that a full exploration of the many ways South Asia was connected with the rest of the world during a particular period in history would allow me to present the other side—a more accurate side—that India was always linked up

with other parts of the world in ways that had deep and profound impact, both in South Asia and on the rest of the world.

We hear a lot about “Global India” nowadays, ever since the liberalization of the Indian economy that began in the 1990s. India is increasingly a force in the world economy. This is an important reality of the world into which current students are coming of age. But I want to say that this is not really a new story. I want students to see this as just the latest chapter in a long history where India has repeatedly interacted with other parts of the world. In the booklet, I borrow a set of four main categories of “globalizing agents” from a work by Nayan Chanda: traders, missionaries, warriors, and adventurers. Of course, the pace of interaction is different in the age of the Internet, but there have always been traders, missionaries, warriors, and adventurers in South Asia who have looked beyond their homelands towards new horizons.

Lucien: *What did you learn as you developed this work of pedagogical scholarship intended for broad audiences?*

Richard Davis: Writing for course use is always humbling for me. I find out, over and over, how much I don’t know. At first, I thought this might be an easy project, in which I could recycle materials I had used in other courses, and summarize things I thought I already knew. But in every case I had to go back and relearn, in order to be able to say things clearly.

In the process, I also came across new topics about which I had been entirely unaware. For example, I found out about a whole genre of classical Indian stories that concerned merchants going overseas to a place they called the “Golden Land” or “Golden Island.” Where was this place? Geographers had debated this, and I learned that the Thai government had even used the name for the Bangkok International Airport. In the end, I don’t believe anyone knows for sure where the Golden Island was. But what fascinated me was the way these stories conveyed the fascination that Indians of this period had for dangerous, mysterious, and possibly lucrative voyages across the sea.

In other cases, re-reading works that I thought I knew well, like the *Ramayana of Valmiki*, in the context of this booklet, led me to view the works in new light. I began to see how the quest of Rama among the brahmin renouncers of Dandaka forest, the monkeys of Kishkindha, and the demons of Lanka fits into a more complex debate in classical India about expansion and contact with other cultural groups, during a period of growth, political unification, and external travel.

I had an ulterior motive, too. I hoped that work on this booklet would help me in another longer project I’ve been writing very slowly for some time, a cultural history of early India. And that has paid off.

I am sure that work on this booklet will insure that I avoid the pitfall of portraying early Indian history as something that occurred in isolation from the rest of the world.

Lucien: *Even though I think we both envisioned this booklet as being most applicable to world history students, in what ways do you see the booklet having applicability to teachers and students in other disciplines?*

Richard Davis: You are right, the primary target audience for this booklet is an advanced high school or college course in world history or Asian history. I hope it works that way. But my own training and teaching has not been primarily in departments of history. I have taught in Religious Studies departments throughout my career, and this has had a big impact on the way I approach any historical issue. Also, I’ve always been very interested in art, and so that too enters into my approach when I try to put on my historian’s hat. I happen to think that Buddhists and Hindus were major players in global South Asia of the first two centuries CE, and that the religious sculptures and structures of that period often provide one very important lens for understanding the dominant issues and values of classical India.

Lucien: *Thank you for the interview, Richard!* ■

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