

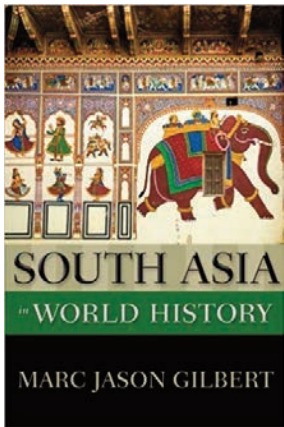
South Asia in World History (New Oxford World History)

BY MARC JASON GILBERT

NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017

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Reviewed by Rachel Ball-Phillips



Writing world history is a daunting task. World historians continue to struggle with how to write effective survey world history texts for use in the classroom. The *New Oxford World History* series is an ambitious project that emphasizes “connectedness and interactions of all kinds—cultural, economic, political, religious,

and social—involving peoples, places and processes” (viii). By situating South Asia within a broader global context from the Indus Valley Civilization to present, Marc Jason Gilbert’s *South Asia in World History* is an attempt to bring South Asian history into a broader global history.

The recent debates over how much time the AP world history exam will cover demonstrate the challenges to covering history from the beginning of humankind to present. The recent proposal to begin AP world history in 1450 instead of earlier posed not only a temporal challenge, but also ran the risk of erasing the history of world civilizations (outside of Europe). By shaping a Eurocentric narrative of world history, we of course run the risk of reinforcing (ahistorical) narratives of the present about the global south. Historians must not only think of the past, but also the present. In the past two decades there has been a conscious shift in world history from a “West and the rest” approach to attempts to more accurately write world histories that include the great civilizations and empires outside of the West.

Gilbert’s *South Asia in World History* attempts to tackle both these questions of time and space through focusing on South Asia and its connections to the world. The book briefly describes South Asia’s pre-

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history before a short foray into the Indus Valley Civilization. The book carries the reader all the way to the present without privileging modern history. Given the focus of the *New Oxford World History* series, South Asia is the centerpiece of the book, and Gilbert makes connections and comparisons throughout the book. While the South Asia chronology follows the standard periodization, what stands out in the book are the tools he uses to turn a history of South Asia into a history of the world. His approaches include comparison, connections, legacies, and interactions. This pedagogical toolkit is useful for scholars and teachers alike when teaching world history.

The most effective technique used in *South Asia in World History* is resituating South Asia’s early history of empires. For example, he sets some of the early Indian empires, such as the Mauryan, in a global context. When he moves to the Delhi Sultanates and the Mughal Empire, he situates them within the broader Islamic world. With the Portuguese entrance into India, Gilbert paints a picture of a global and diverse world in Calicut. By the nineteenth century, nationalisms are situated within a global context with references to “home rule” in Ireland and the Indian National Congress as a prototype for the African Nationalist Congress in South Africa.


There are some useful resources for educators in *South Asia in World History*. One of the most frequent complaints I hear from students is a dearth of maps to situate them geographically. *South Asia in World History* has several useful maps, particularly those that highlight trade and connections. Another helpful resource in this book is the “Website” section, which provides websites and explanations of resources available on each site. This is a useful tool for K–12 educators, as well as those who teach survey courses at the college level. Visual resources are pedagogically important when teaching about South Asia,

a place many of our students have a hard time imagining within the confines of the American classroom.

While world historians eager for a narrative-driven history will appreciate this work, South Asian specialists may be disappointed. The case in point is Gilbert's treatment of Gandhi and the Gandhian philosophy. Beginning with Jainism and the ideas of *ahimsa* (nonviolence), he follows this through to the Gandhian narrative of Indian nationalism and independence—though Gandhi is misspelled as “Ghandi” several times throughout the book. While this works as a tool to create connections, it also limits the voices of other non-elite men and women who have become a significant part of South Asian historiography. The influence that gender and *dalit* (untouchable) histories have had on South Asian history over the past few decades are missing from Gilbert's narrative. A stronger grounding in recent South Asian histories would have given the book a more nuanced approach that reflects the current state of the field.

Shortcomings aside, the project of *New Oxford World History* is an exciting new experiment in the writing of world history. It is an important move away from Eurocentric narratives. *South Asia in the World* moves beyond Eurocentricism, even if it has serious limitations within South Asian historiography. It is a useful resource, although it should not be taught as a standalone text. To use it in a classroom setting, it would need to be tempered with other texts and/or primary sources that tell the stories of women, dalits, and political movements of the left and right that posed serious changes to the status quo.

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