

Guest Editorial

Sharing Knowledge – Connecting Histories

Trade, in the sense of exchange of commodities, has been practiced since the earliest historical times sometimes over considerable distances. For much of this time, however, long distance trade was a risky venture. During the first millennium BCE, two parallel developments reduced the risks associated with travel and stimulated long-distance trade. First, the emergence of dynastic rule which led to heavy investment in the construction of roads and bridges for military and administrative purposes. These also had the effect of encouraging trade within individual societies and facilitating exchanges between different societies. Secondly, large stretches of Eurasia were pacified, and consequently, the costs of long-distance trade decreased.

The vast landmass situated at the intersection of Africa, Asia and Europe has seen important cultural innovations, such as the change from foraging to agriculture leading to settled communities, the domestication of animals, long distance trade, the emergence of scripts and systems of notation all of which supported urban life and contributed to urban growth of the early state. From the first millennium, all along the routes of this landmass, travellers carried their beliefs, values, and religious convictions to distant lands. Although Jainism as a religion was confined mainly to India the community became associated with trade both internal as well as external. Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Hebrew religion all traversed through the many roads that crisscrossed Eurasia.

The period of Antiquity in the region of the Silk Road from Greece to China defined a new sense of the limits of inhabited world, leading in a fundamental way to an age of discovery and geographical redefinition. A growing tension between settled agricultural societies on the one hand, and nomadic groups on the other, brought

together by the exigencies of socio-politics and the economies of trade and consumption, helped to draw attention to the structural change taking place within society.

Inaugurated under Achaemenid rule, encounters among the Iranian, Indian, Hellenic and Chinese worlds were to claim an important role in East-West interactions down to the beginning of the Islamic era, leaving a lasting imprint on both eastern and western culture and thought. This was a period of innovation, adaptation and creation of new knowledge based on readapting observational knowledge as holders moved from site to site to explore and exploit new opportunities that arose in the wake of long distance trade.

The historical encounters among ancient Indians, Iranians, Greeks and Chinese in India from the Achaemenid period through to the Sassanian era left a rich trail of literary, archaeological, epigraphic and numismatic evidence. To date this has been explored primarily within a binary framework (e.g., the numerous studies and conferences about Greeks in India and Greek-Indian interactions, or Iran and India or India and China), which falls short of exposing the breadth and complexity of the quadrilateral symbiosis and interactions of the Iranian, Indian, Greek and Chinese peoples and cultures in the Indian subcontinent for over a millennium.

The heart of the conference held in New Delhi in January 2015 was to promote a more unified perspective, a global vista if you will, on the symbiosis and mutual, quadrilateral interplay of the Greek, Indian, Iranian and Chinese cultures in the wider Indian domain even as far as the ancient Bactrian lands across the changing conditions of the successive Achaemenid, Alexandrine, Seleucid, Mauryan, Indo-Greek, Indo-Parthian, Sasanian, Gupta to mention a few epochs.

The papers and presentations focused on sites (e.g., cities, forts, ports, markets, sanctuaries etc.) with the aim of bringing together archaeological and textual documentation concerning the location and types of concrete meeting points of these cultures, to address larger questions about the different aspects of Indian-Iranian-Greek-Chinese interactions; and to promote discussion of historical and methodological problems that surround the interpretation of the available documentation.

The different disciplinary perspectives that the conference negotiated included textual, archaeological and numismatic evidence that defined geographical locations and boundaries of Greek, Iranian, Indian and Chinese presence in the periods under review, while describing the phenomena of fusion which took place in architecture and art.

Similarly, discussions of linguistic interconnections among Iranians, Indians, Greeks and Chinese through epigraphic and other associated textual, numismatic and archaeological evidence provided insights into the interplay of cross cultural

philosophical, religious, political and mythological thought. Sites of exchange helped to relate economic and commercial interactions to larger aspects of contacts that emerged through such activities linking various aspects of endeavour, including facets of science, technology and medicine.

Engaging the expertise of an international group of interdisciplinary scholars, the conference tried to draw the larger picture of the places, nature, and changing circumstances of Greek-Indian-Iranian-Chinese interactions in the different historical periods addressed. In addition, it drew attention to the numerous difficulties that attend current attempts to disentangle the details of the ancient Iranian-Indian-Greek-Chinese dialogue.

It is hoped that this academic initiative will also help to further enhance the discourse among ancient Indian, Greek, Iranian and Chinese scholars, and further promote the collaboration of Iranian, Indian, Greek, Chinese and other international scholars in the study of a shared ancient cross cultural heritage of the modern world.

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