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## Moguls and Maharajas: Books on India and Indian Influences on Asian Writing

*Abridged version of a talk to the Asia-Pacific Special Interest Group of ALIA,  
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As this talk was originally planned for the 4th of July, American Independence Day, I would like to start with the American who designed Canberra, Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937). Griffin spent his final months in India planning libraries and other buildings, inspired by Indian architecture.

This talk deals mainly with outstanding books about India held by the National Library. It is based partly on my article in the March 2012 National Library Magazine. This is followed by a brief discussion of Indian influences on Asian writing, with examples from my book *Asian treasures* (2011), which describes highlights of the Library's Asian holdings.

### 1. Old, Rare and Beautiful Books on India

While the National Library holds relatively few publications in Indian languages, for many years it has been acquiring Western language resources about the subcontinent, and houses a number of old, rare and beautiful works.

During the 16th century the Portuguese were the first Europeans to sail around Africa to Asia. Vasco da Gama reached India by sea in 1498. In 1510 Afonso d'Albuquerque established Goa on India's west coast as the capital of Portugal's Asian empire. He also seized the strategic port of Malacca in Malaysia. From there the Portuguese soon reached the Spice Islands of Indonesia, as well as China and Japan.

The Library holds a number of rare works about Western contact with India. They include *Navigazioni e viaggi* or Navigation and voyages by the Venetian, Giovanni Battista Ramusio (1485-1557). Its second edition from 1554 is held in one of the Library's most important formed collections, that of Edward Augustus Petherick (1847-1917). Another major travel work from the Petherick Collection was written by the Dutchman, Jan Huygen van Linschoten (1563-1611), who spent six years in India from 1583. Petherick obtained the 1598 English edition of his book, *Discours of voyages*, which is now extremely rare.

The Library's Jesuit Collection contains a few very early European works about India. *Epistolae Indicae* or Indian letters was published in Louvain (now in Belgium) in 1566. It consists of printed letters from Jesuit missionaries. The term Indian letters covered correspondence about China, Japan and Southeast Asia as well as India itself. An Italian Jesuit Giovanni Pietro Maffei (1536?-1603) compiled an early history of Western contacts with India and its neighbours. His *Historiarum indicarum libri XVI* includes an account of the Portuguese in India to the mid-1550s. The Jesuit Collection contains a 1589 edition published in Cologne.

The Library's most significant formed collection about the Portuguese in Asia came from the bibliophile José Maria (Jack) Braga (1897-1988). While Braga lived in Macau and Hong Kong and his main interest was the Portuguese in East Asia, he also held rare works about India. They include the first European imprint to describe Indian medicinal plants and diseases. Its author, Garcia de Orta, a 16th century Portuguese Jewish physician moved to Goa partly to avoid the Inquisition. He became a pioneer of tropical medicine. The Braga Collection includes the 1582 Italian edition, later translated into English as *Colloquies on the simples and drugs of India*.

The Mogul Empire was a Muslim dynasty of Central Asian origin, descended from the great Mongol conquerors. Founded in 1526, their empire dominated much of India. Joannes de Laet (1593-1649), a Flemish geographer, wrote the first detailed European history of the Moguls. *De imperio Magni Mogolis* or Empire of the Great Mogul, covers Mogul rule up to 1628, the year Shah Jahan, builder of the Taj Mahal, ascended the throne. The Library holds a rare 1631 Latin edition, published in Leiden. The Mogul Empire reached its peak during the reign of Aurangzeb (ruled 1658-1707) but then declined rapidly, though it only ended formally in 1858 when the British deposed and exiled its last ruler.

The Library holds two fascinating European books about India during the reigns of Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb. In 1655 Francois Bernier (1620-1688), a French physician decided to see the world. After visiting Egypt he took a ship to Surat on the west coast of India. According to his History of the late revolution of the empire of the Great Mogul, he became physician to the heir apparent, Prince Dara, who was defeated and killed by his younger brother Aurangzeb in the struggle to succeed their ailing father Shah Jahan. Bernier survived and spent 12 years as physician at the Mogul court. He enjoyed Indian art and culture, though he did miss French bread. He wrote that the Taj Mahal "much more deserved to be reckoned among the wonders of the world than those unshapen masses and heaps of stones in Egypt [the Pyramids]." The Library holds the first English edition of Bernier from 1671.

Niccolao Manucci (1639-1717) a Venetian, ran away to sea at 14 and journeyed to India. He joined the army of Prince Dara. Like Bernier he survived the succession struggle won by Aurangzeb, whom he called "bold and valiant, [but] capable of great dissimulation and hypocrisy...Pretending to be an ascetic... under cover of these pretences, he led in secret a jolly life." The Library holds a French edition, *Histoire générale de l'empire du Mogol* which is only a partial translation of Manucci by the Jesuit Francois Catrou published in 1705. It also holds an 1826 English version of Catrou, and a complete translation of Manucci by William Irvine published in 1907, entitled *Storia do Mogor* or Mogul India. Despite historical errors, Manucci is still valued for his detailed picture of Indian life.

An earlier visitor to Mogul India was Thomas Coryate (c. 1577-1617) an English contemporary of Shakespeare. The Library holds his *Greetings from the court of the Great Mogul* published in London in 1616. It contains letters he wrote from India after he had crossed the Ottoman Empire, Persia and Afghanistan. A great linguist, when received by the emperor Jahangir (1569-1627), father of Shah Jehan, Coryate conversed in Persian, the language of the Mogul court. Jahangir gave him money. When the English ambassador heard this he was furious that a fellow countryman had let the side down by going like a beggar to the emperor. Coryate later became ill and died in India. His book is part of the Clifford Collection purchased by the Library in 1963.

By the late 18th century British power was expanding. Calcutta (now Kolkata), an English East India Company trading post since 1690, became capital of Britain's Indian possessions in 1772. From 1791 the Flemish artist, Balthazar Solvyns (1760-1824) spent thirteen years in Calcutta. Solvyns painted daily life, customs and occupations. The Library holds his *Costume of Hindostan*, issued in 1807. It contains 60 leaves of colour plates, including a weaver at a loom; an Indian soldier in European dress, and musical instruments such as a sitar.

John Gould (1804-1881) is widely regarded as the father of ornithology in Australia. It is less well known that he and his wife Elizabeth (1804-1841), a gifted artist in her own right, produced their first book about Indian birds. *A century of birds from the Himalaya Mountains* was originally issued between 1830 and 1832. The book contains 80 colour plates with the illustrations drawn by Elizabeth and reproduced through lithographic printing.

All the titles discussed so far were compiled by Europeans. The following examples date from the final decades of British rule before independence in 1947. They were all written by Indians prominent in politics, law and the arts.

During the colonial period Travancore in the south-west was one of India's princely states, ruled by a Maharaja, though ultimately under British control. From 1906 the fiery journalist K. Ramakrishna Pillai (1878-1916) edited *Swadeshabhimani*, a newspaper in the local Malayalam language. Pillai accused the Travancore government of corruption and the Dewan, the Maharaja's chief official, P. Rajagopalachari (1862-1927), of gross immorality. The Maharaja shut down *Swadeshabhimani* and expelled Pillai. This was a major event in the history of Indian journalism. The Library holds the Dewan's note dated 15th August 1912 on the suppression of the *Swadesabhimani* newspaper, in which Rajagopalachari justified the Maharaja's actions. He stated that the newspaper "waged bitter and relentless war against that idea of personal rule which is the basis of Government in a Native State." Acquired in 1963, the Library's copy has been identified by Professor Robin Jeffrey, an expert on Indian media, as almost certainly the only one in existence.

The Library holds the rare limited 1927 edition, *Masterpieces of Rajput painting*, compiled by O.C Gangoly (1881-1974), an eminent Indian lawyer and scholar of the arts. Influenced by Mogul court art, Rajput painting reached its pinnacle in the late 17th and 18th centuries. The Rajputs were Hindu warrior rulers in north India. Their court painting created a world of heroic men and beautiful women. Many miniatures show pastoral and amorous scenes, particularly of Krishna with his beloved companion Radha. According to Hindu literature, Krishna was an incarnation of the god Vishnu. In his youth Krishna had many romances with cow-girls, among whom his favourite was the beautiful Radha.

In 2002 the Library received an important gift from the eminent Australian scholar, Professor Anthony Low, relating to Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru (1875-1949). The collection includes photocopies of Sapru's correspondence. In Professor Low's words the Sapru material "constitutes one of the major collections for the study of the Indian national movement for independence, especially between 1920 and 1950." Sapru was India's most distinguished constitutional lawyer and played a major role in efforts to fashion constitutional reforms towards an independent India.

## **2. Indian Influences on East and Southeast Asian Books and Writing**

While preparing my book *Asian treasures* I was struck by the strong influence of India on East and Southeast Asian manuscripts and books. Here are a few examples, concentrating on Buddhist texts and Indonesian writing traditions.

### **2.1. Buddhism and the book in Asia**

Buddhism forms a major cultural link between the peoples of Asia from India to the Pacific. The historical Buddha lived around 500 BC in northern India. His teachings spread widely across Asia over many centuries. For hundreds of years they were transmitted orally. Around 100 BC Buddhism began to develop a sacred literature, originally written in two related Indian languages, Pali and Sanskrit. The Pali scriptures were preserved in Sri Lanka, while those in Sanskrit have survived mainly in Chinese and Tibetan translations.

#### *Palm-leaf manuscript from Sri Lanka*

The Library houses a remarkable *ola* or palm-leaf manuscript, almost certainly produced by Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka during the 19th century. By tradition the earliest *ola* manuscripts were created in the 1st century BC, when the Buddhist scriptures were originally written down by Sri Lankan monks in Pali.

According to tradition, Buddhism was brought to Sri Lanka by a mission from the great Indian emperor Asoka (c. 269-232 BC), which converted the local king. From Sri Lanka Buddhism spread to Southeast Asia.

*Ola* manuscripts are made from the leaves of the talipot palm, a huge tree found in Sri Lanka and southern India. The example held by the Library deals with the casting of horoscopes, and is written in Sinhalese. It was donated by Manfred Claasz, who migrated from Sri Lanka to Australia in 1972.

#### *The oldest dated printed book in the world*

The oldest dated printed book to survive is a copy of the Diamond Sutra in Chinese from 868. The sutra consists of seven sheets of white paper printed from carved wooden blocks and rolled up to form a scroll over five metres long. Its printing is of an advanced standard.

The Diamond sutra is a major Indian Buddhist text, which was translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by Kumarajiva (344-414). Son of an Indian and a Central Asian princess, Kumarajiva was brought up in Kashmir. He was captured by Chinese forces and settled in

China. Although an expert translator he is supposed to have compared reading translated scriptures rather than the Sanskrit original to eating rice somebody else has already chewed. The Diamond sutra was part of a secret library sealed up for safekeeping inside a cave in western China around the year 1000. The explorer Sir Aurel Stein visited the cave in 1907, and brought the sutra and many other documents to England. They are now held at the British Library. The National Library houses a high quality modern replica.

#### *The oldest dated printed book in the Library*

The oldest dated printed book in the Library is Chinese and contains a date equivalent to the year 1162. It is an extremely rare if not unique volume from a major woodblock printed set of the Buddhist scriptures. Known as the *Greater sutra of the perfection of transcendent wisdom*, its original Indian text in Sanskrit was translated into Chinese by the famous Tang dynasty pilgrim monk Xuanzang. Between 629 and 645 he journeyed through Central Asia to India, bringing back hundreds of Buddhist works, including this one. He devoted the rest of his life to translating them.

Somehow this volume survived for eight hundred years. It was eventually found by the distinguished historian Fang Zhaoying. The Library acquired this extraordinary treasure in 1962 together with the rest of Fang's collection of books about China.

#### *Buddhist map of the world*

The Library houses a 1710 world map from Japan, based largely on Buddhist cosmology. Buddhism came to Japan through China and Korea, bringing with it knowledge of India, Buddha's birthplace. East Asian Buddhist maps relied on the Chinese monk Xuanzang's recorded travels in India and Central Asia, already mentioned. The map is dominated by the mythical Jambudvipa or southern continent. According to Indian Buddhist cosmology this was the human world, with the mighty peaks of the Himalayas at its centre and to their south India itself.

Although Japan already possessed world maps based on Western cartography this Map of all the countries of Jambudvipa still concentrates on India, with other places arranged around the periphery. The shape of the Indian subcontinent tapering from north to south is rather more realistic than in earlier Buddhist maps. At the top right there is a thin land bridge from Asia to another continent, thought to be America. Below this lies Japan. Europe is shown as a group of islands at the top left.

One reason for the map's continuing popularity was the inclusion of many Asian place-names, especially Indian and Chinese, missing from maps based on European models.

## **2.2. Indonesian Writing Traditions**

The Library houses significant items illustrating Indonesia's early forms of writing. The oldest surviving dateable piece in the country is a stone inscription from around the year 400 in West Kalimantan on the island of Borneo. It is in the Sanskrit language written in an Indian script. The first Indonesian kingdoms were strongly influenced by Indian culture and religions, namely Hinduism and Buddhism. Gradually Sanskrit was replaced by indigenous languages such as Old Malay and Old Javanese. The many surviving manuscripts from diverse regions and cultures indicate the variety of literary traditions found among the

peoples of pre-modern Indonesia. These writing traditions may be traced back to Indian origins.

### *Manuscript of the Ramayana from Bali*

The *Ramayana* is an ancient Indian narrative poem about the hero Rama and his deeds among gods and demons. Originally in Sanskrit, the text dates back 2000 years. The Old Javanese version of this epic was probably composed in the 9th century, although its author and exact date are unknown. It is Java's oldest and longest literary work, and is revered as a masterpiece.

In 1971 the Library acquired a lontar or palm-leaf manuscript from Bali containing part of the *Ramayana* in Old Javanese. It probably dates from the 19th or early 20th century. When Islam became the main religion of Java, it was in Bali, which has retained a form of Hinduism, that much of Java's early literature has been preserved.

### *Batak Bark Books*

In May 2009 the distinguished Australian journalist, author and oral historian, Ray Aitchison donated two Batak bark manuscripts to the Library. He had collected them in the Lake Toba region of Sumatra in 1969-1970. Their age is uncertain, but they are in good condition.

The Batak people had their own script, which is seen in tree-bark manuscripts. These bark books were known as pustaha or pustaka (from the Sanskrit), indicating the Indian origins of Batak writing. Pustaha were created by Batak magicians and healers. The bark books consisted almost exclusively of rituals, oracles and medical recipes.

### **3. Conclusion**

The National Library continues to develop its Western language holdings on India and neighbouring South Asian nations such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

I would like to end with two examples linking Australia and India through books. John Lang, one of Australia's earliest novelists, was born in Sydney in 1816. In 1842 he moved to India, where he became an eminent lawyer and newspaperman. The Library holds the 1861 edition of his *Wanderings in India*. Many titles have also been acquired from the John Lang Project, which is reprinting Lang's works through Mulini Press in Canberra. Alfred Deakin (1856-1919), Australia's second prime minister, wrote two titles after visiting South Asia in 1890-1891. They are *Temple and tomb in India* and *Irrigated India: an Australian view of India and Ceylon*. In them Deakin predicted a bright future with close intellectual ties between Australia and India.

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