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**Review: Empires—Towards a Global History – Conference at the University of Delhi, December 2017**

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## **Empires—Towards a Global History**

University of Delhi, December 2017

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### **REVIEWED BY TCA ACHINTYA**

*TCA Achintya is pursuing a M.Phil. at the Department of History at the University of Delhi. He obtained his B.A. with Honours and M.A. in History from the same institution. Focusing on Modern Indian History, his research looks at the inter-connected political history of Britain and India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, using the prism of legislation on India and parliamentary politics. His work also seeks to contextualize these historical patterns within global historical trends. His other interests include a fascination with mythology and ancient history, not just that of India, but of many other ancient faith systems and cultures, such as Rome and Persia. He also engages with issues of modern laws and their application in both contemporary and historical contexts.*

The Department of History at the University of Delhi, in collaboration with the Weatherhead Initiative on Global History at Harvard University (WIGH) and WIGH's Global History Network organized an International Conference on the theme "Empires—Towards a Global History" at Delhi, on 3<sup>rd</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> December 2017.

The underlying idea of the conference was to utilize the concept of 'Empires' to develop a better understanding of the framework of global history. Building on the enduring influence of empires on the world, the conference sought to break new ground in research by bringing together academics from a wide set of contexts and research domains to think and develop new perspectives and ideas on systematic global history studies, often through the prism of empires.

The sessional break up allowed the gathered audience and scholars to constantly shift gazes and perspectives. With the concept and construct of 'Empire' at the heart of the formulations, the conference proceedings aimed at manipulating the subject of study through differing perspectives. Each theme allowed for a different formulation of 'Empire,' and in the process, gave varying insights into the constructs and formulations of global history as a subject. The sessional themes allowed for an interesting variety of perspectives. Thus, the discussions on commodities and technologies gave eagle eye views on empires as institutions, allowing for scholars to dwell on the external body of empires. In contrast, looking at peripheries, frontiers and crossings, along with travel and the margins of empire, gave sharper insights on trans-regional and trans-imperial connections and relations. Papers on 'Ideas in Movement' and 'Empire and Anti-Colonialism' switched focus entirely from construct to ideology, driving scholarly attention to the underlying principles at play in imperial structures and the meta-narratives that defined them. If commodities brought an eagle eye view to the discussion, papers on imperial urban centres dragged it right down to the street, bridging the

concepts of ‘Local’ and ‘Global’ and highlighting the complexities involved in studying empires, and in the process global history.

Some common underlying themes that threaded their way throughout the conference were the need to both expand outlooks but also to look inwards. It was agreed that global history should not result in a rush to over-generalize and over-analyse the wider connections, forgetting or ignoring the underlying principles and factors that constitute them. A global history that fails to appreciate the local can hardly be built on solid foundations and must tumble like a house of cards once it fails to reconcile its conclusions with the realities of the local.

The conference aimed to be more than just an exercise in academic discourse however. The idea of “Towards a Global History” meant for the organizers a desire to not just explore the intellectual value of global history but also to understand and study global history in practice, while attempting as well to bridge the gaps between the popular and the academic. Global history, locked in an ivory tower of discourse without outreach, was for many of the organizing members a somewhat unpalatable concept. These issues, and the problems and conceptualization of global history, were flagged in the opening session. The conference organizers also hosted a public lecture by noted academic and Indian Parliamentarian, Professor Sugata Bose of Harvard University on “Changing Meanings of Sovereignty and Borders.” Open to the public, and attended by a wide audience of scholars, students and the lay public, the lecture embodied the concept of public outreach that the conference believes should be a critical component of academic discourse.

Global history in practice, rather than as a topic of discussion, was also an important consideration at the conference. Organizers, in addition to hosting panels with paper presentations, also sought to embody the physicality of history and of the learning process. Heritage walks across three sites in Delhi were led by graduate students from the M.Phil. Program of the History Department at the University of Delhi. The walks covered the Ancient Ashoka Pillar in North Delhi, the Lodi Gardens—the resting site of the Last Emperors of the Delhi Sultanate—and the Mutiny Memorial, the colonial commemoration of the Great Revolt of 1857, and an enduring site of contestation and competing narratives. Each great period of history, Ancient, Medieval and Modern, was thus represented in these walks, with each site presentation bringing out the connections and continuities that bound these sites to the world at large. The global character of Delhi, and its status as an imperial site and centre, a city studied at the local, national, imperial and global level, helped participants to focus on the intricacies of history in practice, while doubling up as an enjoyable physical activity far removed from the intellectual rough and tumble inside the classroom.

Breaking with traditional academic procedures and practices, the final sessions of the event sought to be more unstructured, so as to allow free-form discus-

sion. The penultimate session, “Reflections on Global History,” had no presented papers. Instead, senior scholars Professor Sven Beckert of Harvard University, Professor Mamadou Fall of Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Senegal and Matthias van Rossum of the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam gave their views on what global history is and should be. The speakers here utilized the session to discuss research practices, the pressures of the modern political world, the growing pulls and pushes of movements such as nationalism on academic discourse, and the problems of navigating these pressures to engage with global history, even as different groups seek to harness the concept or attack it for their own purposes.

In contrast, the final session “Teaching Global History” shifted the gaze to the pedagogical side of academia. The aim of the session was to shift attention to the other burden of duty, apart from research, that academics must fulfil: teaching, the transmission of knowledge and training of future scholars and students in global history. The session was designed as an open one, with no set plan or dialogue to structure discussions. Teachers and senior faculty spoke to their experiences and problems in the teaching of global history and the challenges of bringing the subject to students while being careful not to overburden them; in turn, students of different levels used the forum to highlight their concerns about accessing global records and histories in a time of growing fear of migrants and outsiders, but also raising questions and seeking answers on how to practice global history, and differentiate it from the usual national or local focus of the university.

The conference thus sought to break ground in multiple new directions. It was not merely an arena where academics presented their research conclusions and works in progress, but was also a site of debate, exploration and learning where both eminent senior academics and young students and scholars were engaged in different intellectual and academic enterprises, letting each participant engage with the proceedings. It sought to break the conference paradigm of presentation and questions, looking to expand into new territories, and making academic exploration a more democratic and globalized process, involving physical exploration, public interaction and unstructured open discussions on the concerns of the different stakeholders of academia. Many conference attendees resolved to try and implement the model of the ‘Empires Conference of Delhi’ as a model for future events at their own institutions.

As an event, the conference was a one-off at the University of Delhi, though part of a wider series of events being organized by the Global History Network of universities hosted by the Weatherhead Initiative on Global History (WIGH) at Harvard. The conferences take place in different countries on an annual basis and represent a valuable site for students and younger academics to engage with a diverse audience and network of peers working the field of global history. This iteration also allowed local graduate students to present papers alongside schol-

ars selected through a global open call for papers, thus exposing students to the experience of presenting alongside their more senior colleagues. Future events of WIGH will almost certainly therefore represent a continuing valuable space in which to deliberate and study the field of global history.