An Interview with a World Historian: Michael H. Fisher

The following is the transcript of an interview with Michael H. Fisher, the Robert S. Danforth Professor of History, Emeritus, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, whose initial interest in the later Mughal Empire and its relations with the British (*A Clash of Cultures: Awadh, the British, and the Mughals*, 1988) segued into a history of the migration of Indians to Britain (*Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travelers and Settlers in Britain, 1600–1857* (2004), and from there on to the history of global migrations (*Migration: A World History*, 2013). A more recent work sets India and its region in a perspective favored by many world historians, *An Environmental History of South Asia: From Earliest Times to the Twenty First Century* (2018).

The interview explores a pattern among educators whose careers often naturally evolve from a specific area of expertise to embrace broader historical processes as a part of their professional lives.

This is an edited transcript of an interview that was conducted via telephone by Marc Jason Gilbert, the editor of *World History Connected*, on January 8, 2022.

The Interview

Gilbert: What influenced you to study the history of India? Any family or travel connections?

Fisher: It was really a scholarly choice in the sense that, as an undergraduate at Trinity College, Hartford, I studied many different world cultures and tried to see which ones were the most interesting to me. India really emerged as the most exciting and that was how I first became engaged in the study of India, its cultures, and its history.

I had lived internationally a bit in Brazil, Britain, and the Caribbean, but as far as just studying a culture, India developed from this undergraduate coursework. I then intensively studied Hindi during the summer of 1971 at the South Asia Summer Language Institute [SASLI] in Madison, Wisconsin. I next went to Mysore University in India as an undergraduate and studied Kannada language and anthropology for the Fall 1971 semester. It

was a particularly formative time for India, not least due to the war between India and Pakistan that arose from political disputes between what was then the eastern and western wings of Pakistan. India's response to escalating violence in the eastern wing was a military intervention, which achieved that wing's nationhood as Bangladesh. It was also a very formative time in my own scholarly career, since I was developing my engagement with Indian languages, first Hindi and a little bit of Kannada, and later, in graduate school at the University of Chicago, more extensively with Urdu and finally Persian. Language studies enable you to become more experienced in, and gain understanding of, a different culture. This also draws you further into various kinds of scholarly endeavors and research projects there, and enables you to carry those projects out using original source materials.

Gilbert: What drew you study early modern Indian history, particularly the Mughal Empire?

Fisher: Well, I think that when you are looking at such a vast array of historical events and processes as one does in India, you have to start somewhere and concentrate somewhere. I found that the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, that saw Mughal imperialism transitioning into to various kinds of regional cultures, and then witnessed the rise of British imperialism, seemed an especially fruitful period for a historian. Further, at the time that you, Marc, and I started to study India, it was less written about, that is, it was not an area that was widely studied in the US. The eighteenth century, in particular, was relatively less researched than other eras of India's history. So, that period seemed to me to offer a rich array of possibilities for my own contribution to our understanding of Indian history.

Gilbert: Yes, absolutely true. That particular period in the kinds of general readings that we had available to us were all about names and dates and battles and rulers and nawabs and without much analysis. Fortunately, I was at UCLA, where South Asianists, like Stanley Wolpert (History), John Richard Sisson (Political Science) and parade of visiting scholars, such as Aziz Ahmad (*An Intellectual History of Islam in India,* 1969*)*, who encouraged students to see through the tyranny of names and dates and be not afraid of offering their own opinion.

Fisher: Yes, I recall that Aziz Ahmad was a very generous scholar. You are right to mention the importance of interacting with the various other people in the same graduate cohort as you, and also with senior faculty members engaged with their special subject; all of these people became one's teachers as well as being exemplary researchers in their own right.

Gilbert: What do you think about over-specialization in historical education and practice?

Fisher: Faculty who teach at the undergraduate level are really working with a broader audience than perhaps are faculty in a graduate program that is focused mainly on research. Of course, one of the joys of being a faculty member at the graduate level is that you have the time for one's own research, and you can pursue your own particular scholarly interests.

However, the possible danger there is that those faculty might tend to get deeper and deeper into an often very narrowly defined research topic. Notably, you often encounter more diverse subjects that you might choose to study when you are teaching more broadly! So, it may be a good thing that graduate faculty are increasingly expected by their administrators to teach very widely to undergraduates, where they might see things that they would like to follow-up outside the quite specific areas of their own earlier studies.

Gilbert: Yes. The growth of world history in undergraduate teaching and at the graduate level may encourage that outcome. Which calls to mind the perils and challenges of engaging in often narrowly focused national histories, such as India, in what is a globalizing world. I know that you have been recently been interviewed in Turkey with regard to the published Turkish translation of your *Short History of the Mughal Empire* (2015). Are there any inherent issues in taking a transregional and regional approach to history, as you do, in countries, such as Turkey (or India, or the United States) which can trend toward national histories over more international approaches?

Fisher: Yes, I think that researching and publishing in a culture that is not your own remains a challenging and also fascinating process. Those of us who teach modern India history are familiar with how nationalist responses and analyses are often in tension with a growing awareness of the interconnectedness of the world's history. Turkey offers a good example of this: it has long been proud of its own national history, but is also eager today to promote the idea that Turkey is the leading part of a Turkish cosmopolis across much of west Asia. You've got an Ottoman-centered view of the primacy of Turkey as the center of their world, but then you want to look at other Turkish or Turkish derived cultures, which leads you obviously to the Mughal Empire.

In fact, the subtitle of the Turkish translation of my book suggests that the Mughal Empire is really an eastern Turkish dynasty. In Turkey, people customarily refer to this empire by the term "Baburi" or "Bâbürlüler," based on the name of the Turkman founder of this dynasty in India, Emperor Babur, rather than "Mughal," although the Persian-derived name "Mughal" is so widely used you also have to use that. Indeed, Babur was proudly a patrilineal descendant of Timur, or Tamerlane, and his dynasty referred to themselves as Timurids and spoke Turkish as their family language. The interview was just a few days ago, and it makes one think about how does the Mughal Empire look from either the perspective of Ottoman Turkey or today's Turkey? Then more broadly, how does it look from other parts of the world? There is a translation in China underway of this same book about the Mughal Empire. I have great interest in seeing how they are going to frame this book in a Chinese framework, how the publisher is going to make it interesting to Chinese readers, particularly given China's current relationships with its Muslim population and other Muslim countries. This raises worthy questions that could lead a historian to several years of research, should one choose to follow them up.

Gilbert: I once gave an invited keynote talk at a conference in Beijing, which set China as the locale of the beginning of the Second World War. The audience response was positive. However, some of the audience approved this idea as further confirmation of China's importance in world history, while others were unsure whether the anti-communist Chiang Kai-Shek should be given credit for his role in fighting the Japanese, even though the Chinese government at the time of the conference—contesting Japanese ownership of an island in dispute—to enlist him as an great patriot to better establish the idea in the public mind that all Chinese were opposed Japanese aggression, then as now.

Fisher: I don't know if you were in India during the Emergency (1975–1977), but particularly then one began to use sort of a coded language, indeed a practice that India uses so widely. For example, the citing of a "foreign hand" as the cause for any trouble, because you do not want to mention Pakistan, China, or another neighboring state explicitly. And so, people began to talk in ways that everyone understands what you are saying, without literally saying anything that could be criticized.

Gilbert: As you know the field of world history has many dimensions including grand narratives and comparative cross- cultural analyses. In this issue we feature Peter Stearns' analysis of "Manners in World History," which examines many cultures in search of patterns that can be found around the world. However, many world historical studies emerge from works by area specialists who for research and teaching purposes seek to place the history of those regions or even specific nations in world historical perspective. A goodly number of those have merged from Area Studies programs, and particularly, South Asian Studies and/or from mentorship by senior Asian historians who favored world history perspectives even long before the founding of the World History Association. Put simply, is there a reason or reasons for the affinity of historians of South Asian or historians of India to engage in world history?

Fisher: It's a fascinating question and, hazarding a response, I agree that many historians of South Asia choose projects that might lead them to world history themes. The first reason, I think, is probably that, although South Asia is called a "subcontinent," it is really a vast cultural and geographical segment of the world, with a great deal of diversity within it. People who study one particular region in India are pursuing a perfectly valid approach, but many scholars do look at other regions or do transregional studies, all within India itself. So, you are really talking about a segment of the world's complex diversity within South Asia. I think that would tend to make historians of South Asia more aware of transregional or transcontinental factors. Second, you have European imperialism, particularly imperialism by the British but also the Portuguese, French, and other Europeans before that. So, you are almost inevitably putting South Asia within a larger world historical context. Thus, I think these features of studying South Asia history would tend toward affinities for world history.

Another aspect is that, in approaching South Asian history from the U.S. or anywhere in the West, and teaching our students, we have a tendency to try to find reference points for South Asian cultures from within our own home cultures for our students' sake. So, you often get a comparative element embedded within American undergraduate and graduate courses about South Asia.

Further, I suspect that relatively few people are trying to teach world history as a comprehensive topic: how can you possibly look simultaneously at all the factors going on at the same time in different parts of the world? So, there is a tendency within that kind of a course design to try to take a few examples or themes for viable two culture comparisons. Therefore, I think both because of the subject matter we are taking up as well as due to our vocations as Western-based teachers of South Asian history, world history becomes quite attractive and congenial to many of us.

Gilbert: I think that instructors today, perhaps in schools under influence of the widely adopted C3 curriculum and COVID-19 educational depravations, are restricted in terms of teaching much actual content, and thus are lucky when able to address in any depth even comparative examples in history: say, the existence of Indo-European languages as expressed in Greek and Indian epic oral traditions. Many world history textbooks at the college level use either a thematic or mixed regional/chronological approach to avoid the problem of teaching about history that avoids both the trap of being a mile wide and inch deep, or its opposite: too much detail pushing out analysis. I think that selected case studies have become increasingly important as a management tool, and therefore there will probably always be a large place for India in world history surveys due to its status a civilization with connections to many others and with world historical processes, such as the spread of the world's religions and anti-imperialism. In that regard, I wonder if you think Gandhi is as much taught in world history classes today was in the past.

Fisher: Well, I would certainly hope so. I have been retired since before the pandemic so I'm not absolutely current, but during my thirty-five years of teaching, I regularly offered a course on Mohandas Mahatma Gandhi in the context of nonviolent opposition to imperialism on a global scale. Nonviolent opposition to imperialism was the main topic and Gandhi was the main example. Nearly all the students who were doing their research papers came up with examples of the kinds of issues and topics and concerns that Gandhi had, and most tried to do comparative studies focused on nonviolence as practiced in other locations than India. This might have been the reverse of a more common pattern, which is teaching the life of Gandhi within the Indian historical context, and then perhaps expanding it outward.

But I agree with you that good world historians can give a sense of the specific flavor and understanding of a culture that they are not themselves from, and put it into a larger context. In the context of the study of immigration, the parallel is to talk about the global processes influencing the migration on a transcontinental or transregional scale, but we also

need to understand the local contexts, both where these people came from and where they went. So, the case study model that you talked about earlier works very well in terms of getting at least the sense of how things happen in a lot of different places and affect each other.

Gilbert: That leads me to my next question. Could you talk a little about your studies of South Asian migration to Britain and any observations on that work and perhaps a comment or two on the situation of South Asians in Britain with regard to other immigrant communities or just the issue of cultural blending that has been taking place particularly within South Asian and British culture within the last couple of decades?

Fisher: When I began my work on South Asians "moving out," what was in my mind was an extension of Indian history over the globe, or at least as far as Europe. Then, I began to research about people from South Asia as they interacted overseas, particularly in Britain, from their earliest arrivals onward. A lot of people who are reading this kind of work are British-centered and they are often South Asian-descended Britons. For them, the agenda is often to show the longevity and significance of South Asians living in Britain, attesting to their being a "valid" part of Britain. However, many of them do not have more than a general knowledge about the Indian cultural and historical contexts from which their ancestors, or the people I am writing about, came. But they are very interested in how these people functioned in Britain. I find that a lot of the local history done by scholars in Britain about Indians who live there is very valuable, even though the questions that some of them are asking are different from the ones that I, as primarily an historian of South Asia, am asking. So, this project has turned out to be more of a dialogue than a consensus.

Gilbert: It is very true that we often do not ask the right questions because as investigators' perspective is skewed towards themselves. As a result, the issues racism, immigration, and national identity are stultified because we do not have the proper framework to ask the questions. I think this underscores many divisive issues. Having lived in London for many years and visited often, I was focused South Asians and West Indians facing discrimination (the Portobello Riots, etc.), but the life of South Asians in Britain struggling with their Britishness did not occur to me. What matters is not whether I should have or not, but the lesson you draw on how we must always be open to asking other questions and other points of view, which is essential work of all historians.

Fisher: I would like to follow up on that. When we look at how Indian history as it is taught in India today as well, particularly concerning topics like the Mughal Empire, you see some of this same set of questions about the "Indian-ness" of the Mughals. Similarly, in Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Mughal Empire is often taught in light of today's political concerns. This same perspective is something that a lot of countries and cultures tend toward. They ask: How does this affect me? How is this relevant to my life? That inevitably means the questions are framed by us and not by the actors in history.

Gilbert: I am fascinated with your interest in the literature of South Asians who travel within the subcontinent and who also visit Britain and Europe. What do you think is the value of that kind of work?

Fisher: I think many people agree that a person is an entity that carries with her or with him certain kind of ideas and certain kind of capacities. So being able to follow a person, or even a class of people, as they move around the globe, you can see what they are bringing with them, and what they are encountering, how they adjust, particularly when you are talking about moving from what was becoming a colonial context into the metropole, the core. You can see the power differences really come out. But, the fact that some of these Indian immigrants could write or participate in public discourse in Britain really gave them a distinctive place. Most of the records about these Indians were kept by Britons.

But in these Indian immigrants' own writings, or in court transcripts where their testimony was taken verbatim, or in some newspaper articles, or even in visual images of them by Britons, you can see the way they are trying to shape their self-definition in asymmetrical dialogue with the host culture. Such issues include: the many diverse kinds of migrants by class, gender, and community, the ways that immigrants are perceived by the host culture, the way they perceive themselves, the political authority or moral authority that comes from having been in an area first, as well as the loss of authority that many immigrants tend to face. So, in that sense, the *Migration* book was part of a series on world history and the topic of migration really is one of those that required the author to have a balance globally, as well as chronologically over time. As you know, in such books, you have a very short number of pages and have got to pack a lot into it!

Gilbert: On the subject of immigration, you became an author in the New Oxford World History series (on migration), as I have. What do you think of that experience and of your work, *An Environmental History of India: From Earliest Times to the Twenty-First Century* (2019) a Cambridge University Press series entitled "New Approaches to Asian History"?

Fisher: I think in both cases, I was drawn to a comprehensive world history perspective. In the *Migration* book, I deliberately tried to keep the amount of material on South Asia and South Asians proportionate (or even a little less proportionate) to other parts of the world. This meant that I was reading very widely about areas of the world that I hadn't really thought much about at the graduate level, or later as a teacher. So, when taking a vast theme like migration and trying to look at it comprehensively, you begin to emphasize global processes. In my case, that decentered South Asia, but then when you go back to do South Asian history again, that experience enriches your understanding of it.

In my *Environmental History,* I was again trying to see the effects of the environment of India on the rest of the world, as well as vice versa. For example, the rising of the Himalayan mountains led to the creations of monsoons, which seasonally affect regions from east

Africa all the way over to Southeast Asia and beyond. Conversely the rest of the globe has long had effects on South Asia. Again, the "Columbian Exchange," that is the importing of a lot of so-called New World plants and animals, and the importing of American gold and silver, both really affected India. So that when you are thinking about environmental history, it is hard to put boundaries around global processes. One of the things that was striking to me in writing the *Environmental History* book was that so many other environmental historians consider all of South Asia up to 1947, but suddenly in 1947, it is as if the of third South Asia that became Pakistan, did not exist. So, the environmental webs that they have been looking at on a subcontinental basis are, post-1947, limited to the boundaries of India alone! I tried to avoid that by continuing to think about these larger processes that continue to affect all of South Asia.

Gilbert: With regard to the rising of the Himalayas, my original draft of *South Asia in World History* (2017) opened with an easily produced set of images tracing the movement of the tectonic plates that shaped East Africa as it created the Deccan plateau and much of southern India, while the space between the Deccan and the Himalayas became filled with mountain run-off to create the rich soil of Gangetic plain that connects the two and is the driver of much of the region's history. The publisher declined to use it, but in teaching I used the images for years to connect the environment and Indian history through the origins of the subcontinent itself.

Gilbert: I notice that you have served on many academic committees both in your own department and other important national panels and grant agencies. I wondered what was your experience in trying to not so much shape, but trying to make a difference in improving the way these committees look at the world, look at grantees or look at areas of study.

Fisher: I think there is usually a distinction among agencies and people about research projects that include South Asia but with agendas and presuppositions based on their home region. Some applicants are just looking for data from India in order to answer an established question in their home discipline. Some applicants do not seem to be very open to other kinds of ways of framing questions. Purely as a hypothetical example, a granting agency may evaluate—some even favor—applications seeking support to study "caste" by an investigator looking for universals (really for contrasts or comparisons with issues from their own culture), but who does not have much knowledge of "caste's" Indian regional or local complexity. On the other hand, there are granting agencies that must evaluate—or even favor—applications for grants from people who are so committed to the study a particular sub-region (in South Asia, I could mention West Bengal particularly), that they do not know other Indian languages and are not really aware of parallel developments in other parts of South Asia, let alone the world.

I have always favored during my participation on grant evaluation panels, and in my assessment of individual applications, the taking of a more balanced perspective, one

neither narrowly conceived only within a local context nor dominated by what their discipline or investigatory principles (American or Indian) happen to be favoring at that time, neither of which are, again, very open to other kinds or ways of framing questions. For this reason, I have always favored applicants who will be working in a research language that is not their mother tongue. Some disciplines and granting agencies emphasize this, but others expect that "native informants" will provide the outside researcher with the necessary local data, despite the inevitable distancing between researcher and subject that such intermediaries and translators cause.

Gilbert: That has also been my experience and the position I have taken as an evaluator. I have two more questions, one that bring us back to Indians coming to Britain, and the other regarding the future of world history.

Gilbert: In a recent issue, the interview subject was Trevor Getz. Together with artist Liz Clarke, he used trial transcripts telling one woman's story of her life as a slave and her search for justice in West Africa in 1800 to produce an extremely successful a graphic novel, *Abina and The Important Men* (2011). I mention this because of your work on Dean Mahomet (*The Travels of Dean Mahomet: An Eighteenth Century Journey through India*, 1997). It seems that tracing his life—as a soldier in India, as an immigrant to Ireland and then to Britain, as well as the author and the introducer of Indian cuisine in London—would seem a natural subject for a graphic novel or film.

Fisher: Screenwriters occasionally approach me to do such a film, and there is always the possibility of a historical novel based on his life. However, as is common to anyone with a historical "property," you share your material with them but then they don't necessarily come up with financing, or years later they get back to you and they have a different take on the project. I have not given hope, since I do think it would be an excellent film. Another potential film project would be the life of D.O. Dyce Sombre. He was clearly a very morally compromised personality, but he was the first Asian as well as the first Indian elected to the British Parliament (in 1841). Though his election was annulled and, as a result, these cross-cultural recognitions are attributed to Dadabhai Naoroji (elected in 1892), this alone suggests just how interesting, and possibly cinematic, his entire life was. There are a number of wonderful possible films and graphic novels about him, or about other early Indian immigrants to Britain. As for a novelization of Dean Mahomet's life, the problem is similar to that of many film adaptations, since sometimes both film makers and publishers develop a take on your material and suggest representations in ways you as an historian don't necessarily feel comfortable. Films and fiction are different genre with different kinds of rules from history-writing.

Gilbert: Given the increasing distance from reality of novels and commercial films—the trend now is to leave behind "inspired by real events" disclaimers and just go for

"imagining" events to suit the artistic and/or commercial interests of directors, producers and publishers—those of us attempting to keeping the story straight (as much as academic disciplines can) do have our work cut out for us. Can world history instruction stand up against Marvel? Or put it in a way that can bring this lively discourse to a close, what do you see in the future with regard to world history as an academic field and its place in general education in the US?

Fisher: I think world history in classes in the US has much promise, especially when you consider the fact that there is a growing awareness of how global climate change is actually a world-wide process. The current pandemic is another example where you find people looking at parallel and contrasting trends of this same disease across and among countries, in ways that many people had probably not thought about before. It strikes me if anything is going to lead people to think on a larger scale, it is the concurrence of issues like these.

Gilbert: For such an answer, and for your generosity in participating in this interview, you have my deepest thanks.