An Antique Land; Geology, Philology and the Making of the Indian Subcontinent, 1830-1920

The Leverhulme Trust-funded project at the School of History will investigate the history of the geological discovery of the past of Indian subcontinent in its philological, anthropological and cultural dimensions and its links with the discovery of Indian antiquity. Sporadic studies of Indian geology different parts of the country had commenced by the end of the eighteenth century. The more systematic geological discovery of India’s past started with the discovery of marine fossils in the Siwaliks at the Himalayan foothills in the 1830s by Royle, Falconer, and Cautley. This was then linked to fossil studies in the Narmada valley and the work on tectonic plate movements by archdeacon J.H. Pratt, leading to a new story of the making of the Indian subcontinent, that of the geological, but also an almost mythological formation. Although the research will be primarily on India, the global implications of these researches in terms of the emergence of ideas of comparative geology and the Gondwanaland will also be investigated.

There are two main objectives in the project: first to develop a chronological narrative of fossil discoveries and researches in Meridian arc in different parts of the country and their local and global implications. Second, to trace the complex history of the interplay between various disciplines, transmissions of knowledge between India and Europe and USA, and how these shaped the imaginations of the past primarily of India and also other parts of the world.

The project will highlight the unique convergence of cultural and scientific ideas that took place in India. In India, modernity has often existed in close proximity with the pursuit of antiquity. Modern scientific knowledge has often been used to invent and ratify ideas of Indian heritage and tradition. European scholars, Orientalists, naturalists and missionaries from the late eighteenth century, viewed India as a unique site of cultural and natural heritage. India has also evoked imaginations of ‘lost worlds’ or of being the ‘cradle of civilization’ among Europeans as well as Indians.

This project will investigate a significant but less studied instance of this intimacy between science, culture and antiquity in India by analysing how geological researches in India shaped the discovery of lost worlds within the Indian subcontinent and on a global scale. In doing so, this project will identify two processes; how the convergence of science and culture helped in the imagination of an Indian past; and second, the role the subcontinent played in global imaginations of antiquity.

Another significant aspect of this project is its setting within the Indian empire, which provided the colonial geologists with the unique geographical scope and opportunity to compare and collate their discoveries on a wide scale. Geologists of India travelled beyond the Indian subcontinent to Tibet, Arabia, Afghanistan, Persia, Burma, and Southeast Asia to compare the fossils and flora and fauna of these places. The project will therefore highlight the significance of imperial geography in the science of geology.

PhD programme ‘Colonial Ethnography and Human Antiquity in India, 1820-1900’

The PhD is designed to provide it with an autonomy of scope of research questions and yet to enable it to contribute significantly and centrally to the project. It will provide the vital link of colonial ethnography and questions of race and human origin in India to the research by the PI and RA on geology. We have little idea about the specific ways investigations
among tribes in India were linked to discoveries of geological strata taking place at the same time. The thesis will explore the links between the ideas of human origin and geological evolution in India. The thesis will analyse the ethnographic studies undertaken by the British in India, particularly in the Central Provinces from the 1820s, simultaneous to the geological excavations, such as the discovery of human fossils in the Narmada valley in the 1830s, which started debates about human origins in India.

The successful candidate for the PhD will have an MA (merit or distinction) in history or related subjects. Familiarity with ethnography/anthropology and Indian history is desirable.

The student will join the School of History, which has an exciting postgraduate research culture. Informal enquiries can be made to the director of the project, Dr Pratik Chakrabarti (p.chakrabarti@kent.ac.uk).