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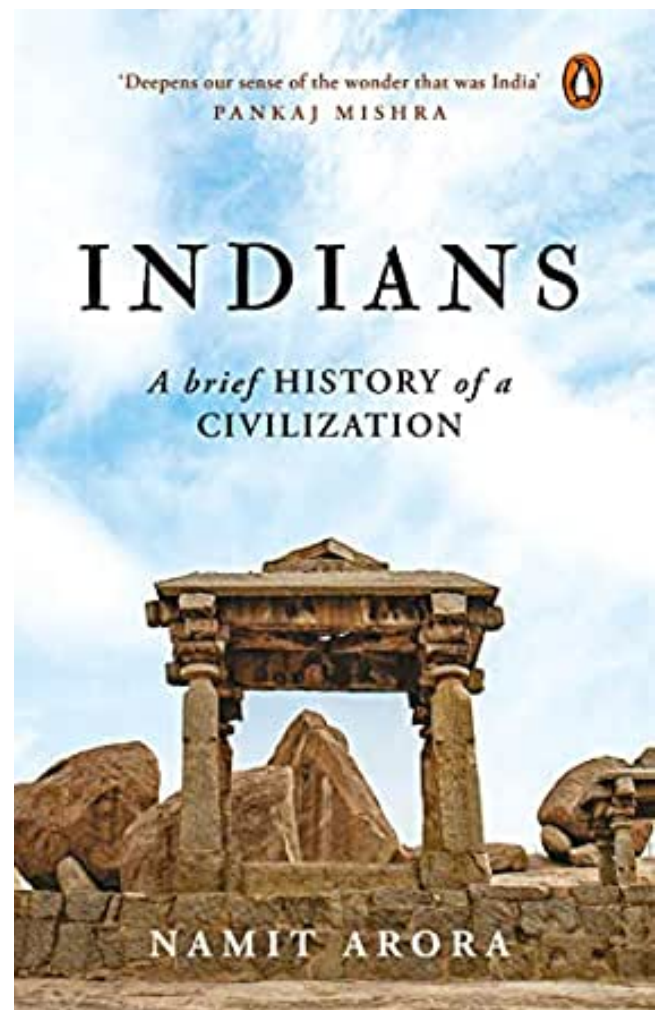
SCIENCE ARTS PHILOSOPHY POLITICS LITERATURE

“Indians – A brief History of a Civilization” by Namit Arora

POSTED ON MONDAY, MAR 1, 2021 2:15AM BY [RUCHIRA PAUL](#)

by **Ruchira Paul**

Travelers to India came from all corners of the world through the ages for different reasons. The very first modern humans probably came there in order to escape harsh climate conditions elsewhere in the world. Latter day visitors arrived with varied objectives in mind. Some came seeking material fortune, some for spiritual enlightenment and others merely out of curiosity. A few who came, took what **they wanted** and left. Others came to **conquer** and decided to stay and make India their home. Then there were mercenary visitors who looked at India as a **vast revenues source** for enriching themselves and their own native lands while also seeing an opportunity to instill their religious and “civilizing” values on a foreign nation. They too decided to stay but never thought of India as home. India still attracts visitors from across the world. Most come as tourists to check out its numerous and varied natural and historical vistas (there is always the Taj Mahal). Some may be enticed by more



quirky and personal adventures such as **chasing the monsoon** or seeking the ever elusive spiritual and emotional fulfillment. Scholarly pursuits and business opportunities attract others to the second most populous nation in the world which defines itself as a multi-cultural modern day free market democracy with an ancient checkered past that is a palimpsest of layers upon layers of human foot print left by visitors who crisscrossed its landscape in all directions for many thousands of years.

The author of “*Indians...*” Namit Arora is a visitor in his own land. Born and educated in India, Arora left for foreign shores to pursue higher education and later a career as an engineer in Silicon Valley. After two decades of living abroad, in 2013 he returned to India to settle there permanently. This book is the record of his travels through India to the same places first in 2006 and a return visit in 2019. The author speaks both as an insider familiar with India as also an outsider who can examine the country of his birth through the lens of a global perspective. Arora is an enthusiastic and informed world traveler and photographer who periodically took time off from work to visit many far corners of the world.

The title of the book reads, **INDIANS – A *brief* History of a Civilization**. The word ‘brief’ is in italics for a good reason. After all, how do you tell the long complex history of India in less than 260 pages? The very idea seems audacious. But Arora deftly manages the feat by designing his itinerary and narrative technique with skill and flair. The destinations in the book are not randomly picked tourism sites. He travels to six places –

Dholavira, Nagarjunakonda, Nalanda, Khajuraho, Vijayanagara (Hampi) and Varanasi to stitch together a convincing narrative of India’s history beginning around 2,500 BCE and ending in the present day.

Of these, except for Varanasi, all the sites were once lost – buried, abandoned or overgrown with jungles. They were later discovered and reconstructed with the efforts of archeologists and scholars with monetary support from the government of India. Varanasi or Benares, the heart of India’s Hindu tradition, has existed continuously in one form or the other since 800 BCE. It can rightfully be named India’s Eternal City, still exerting a powerful spiritual hold over the hearts and

minds of the faithful. Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib found Benares a charming, beguiling place. Drastic structural and environmental changes have taken place during the intervening century and a half since Ghalib.

Reading Arora's book is akin to embarking upon a virtual journey with a very well informed travel guide who has dug deep into numerous scholarly works related to the time and place he describes, who listens to the accounts of local residents, examines the evidence unearthed by archeologists, linguists, epigraphers and geneticists and then draws his own conclusions. Overly glorified and romanticized accounts based on myth making are dismissed. Instead we are taken through the structural layouts of the sites – the palaces, houses and dormitories of the residents, the public places of trade, worship and entertainment, the irrigation and sewage systems, agricultural practices, the geographic features and climate, the arts and crafts and the security measures against intruders provide an insight into the minds and lifestyles of the inhabitants of these places.

One of the most effective techniques that the author employs in writing this book is that he alternates between his own observations and commentary and those of ancient visitors who left behind eye witness written accounts of India's past during various times in its history. Many of them were scholars and historians who cast a curious and critical eye on the social and cultural practices current in their times while others were adventurers and mercenaries passing through or looking for a lucrative career in an exotic land. That these visitors were not Indians and therefore not steeped in the local religious or cultural mores of the land, helps shine a more objective light on the day to day lives of ancient Indians that cannot be found in any royal history written as a tribute to a ruler by hired scribes. Among the more eminent foreign writers whom Arora cites were Megasthenes (Greece, c 300 BCE), Faxian, Xuanzang, Yijing (China, 400 – 700 CE), Al Beruni (Eastern Persia/ Afghanistan, 1017- 30 CE), Marco Polo (Italy, late 13th century CE) and Francois Bernier (France, 1658 – 69 CE). Their writings provide valuable contemporaneous accounts of Indian life. For example, Bernier astutely noted the stagnant nature of Indian society under the rule of Aurangzeb, the last powerful king of the Mughal dynasty. The emperor owned all the land and the heavy taxes levied on the common

folk went towards financing wars and keeping the ruling elite in decadent luxury. Little was invested for public good, higher education, fine arts, new industries or scientific innovations. In Bernier's opinion India was weak and riddled with superstition, caste and religious divide and lacking a national core identity. Less than a hundred years after Bernier made his observations, the British East India Company effectively began its rule in India, laying the ground work for 200 years of British colonization.

The book raises many interesting questions about India's past through the visits to the "lost and found" cities. Why did the first Indus Valley Civilization aka the Harappan Civilization disappear without a trace leaving behind impressive and seemingly flourishing urban settlements? How soon after the Aryan invasion did new languages, religious practices and a change in the country's ethnic makeup become the dominant face of India's ancient history? Why did Buddhism almost completely lose its foothold in India, its birth place, where it once enjoyed both royal patronage and common following spanning nearly a thousand years over vast areas of the land from Bengal to Eastern Afghanistan and deep into South India? What do the unusually graphic and sexually explicit iconography juxtaposed with devotional images depicted on the temple walls of Khajuraho signify? How much Hindu-Muslim comity or hostility actually existed in India? Some of these questions have plausible answers while others remain shrouded in mystery.

The warrior like Aryan invaders from Central Asia swept over India and supplanted its older religious and linguistic traditions with their own due mostly to the absence of any meaningful resistance from the inhabitants of India's western borders and central plains. The Aryans brought with them a proto Indo European language which later developed into Sanskrit, the language of ancient Hindu scriptures and liturgy. They introduced the tradition of fire worship, a pantheon of gods very similar to that of the Greeks, the practice of burning their dead and Sati (burning the living widows of powerful men on the funeral pyre of their husband), the caste system and horses. The caste system most likely took root quickly in India because the light skinned invaders saw the darker skinned natives as an inferior class of humans. The original Aryan Vedic religion evolved to adopt and incorporate older

indigenous gods such as Shiva and some powerful female gods who went on to become leading deities in the Hindu tradition. Despite the fundamentalist Hindu right's claim that the Aryans and their language Sanskrit were entirely of local Indian origin, modern day linguistics and genetic studies convincingly point to an Aryan migration trail radiating east and west towards Persia, South Asia and Europe from a region in Central Asia.

Buddhism's demise in India can probably be explained by the excessive emphasis on the renunciation of the material world and its economic dependence on royal patronage and alms, as also the resurgence of competitive strains of Hindu revival movements. As for Khajuraho's startling erotic sculpture in places of worship, the explanation lies in the tantric religious substrate of the time. That class of temple art although not widespread, was not restricted to Khajuraho. Hindu-Muslim relations India have been studied and there is much to examine and contemplate especially in light of the rise in Hindu nationalism in present day India which describes the Muslim rule in India as an unmitigated disaster. In that context it is fair to ask why India did not go the way of Iran, another ancient Aryan civilization with an old established religion and a magnificent history of scholarship, art, architecture and warfare that converted almost entirely to Islam after the Arab invasion while India remained a majority Hindu entity throughout the almost 700 years of Muslim rule. (At the time of the Indian Independence in 1947, undivided India was about 25% Muslim)

The chapter on Dholavira, an ancient Harappan town discovered in the great salt flats located in the northwestern edge of coastal Gujarat struck me as the most interesting part of the book. Dholavira's architecture and artefacts resemble those of better known Harappan settlements like Mohenjodaro and Harappa (both in Pakistan). The archeological discoveries made at all the related sites point to a civilization that flourished around the same time as ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. The relics and architectural remains found there seem to indicate that Harappan societies were relatively egalitarian (no great palaces), peaceful (no battle scenes depicted on city walls or artefacts), civic minded (irrigation canals, water storage tanks and sewage systems), not overly religious (no public places of

worship) and very likely matrilineal. They buried their dead unlike the Aryans who cremated theirs. There is evidence that the cities were abruptly abandoned and their inhabitants scattered to other parts of the subcontinent to lead a rural and pastoral life. I found it very intriguing that those ancient city dwellers who left behind an advanced organized urban existence, did not again attempt to build similar planned homesteads in other parts of India to which they migrated. The mystery of the rise and fall of Dholavira and its sister cities is further deepened by the frustrating fact that the ancient Harappan script has not yet been deciphered.

INDIANS, is a very well put together snap shot of India's long history. It is an excellent read for anyone who is looking for a glimpse into India's ancient and medieval past without having to delve into large, lugubrious tomes. Arora's writing style is crisp, concise and well-reasoned. His keen observations, a sympathetic understanding of human nature and sense of humor make the reading of the book an enjoyable experience for readers like me who are not serious students of history but are still curious about the past lives of our ancestors. During its long tenure as an ancient land that has been continuously populated since at least 30,000 years (more likely closer to 50,000), India has seen the rise and fall of numerous dynasties, philosophies, social customs and technology while a continuous flow of new people have entered its territory and rejiggered its gene pool. Its history has been written by many different people and from many different points of view. Recently, the Hindu nationalist government in India is attempting to rewrite that history based on lies and distortions in order to further its own political ends. That narrative is often jingoistic, sometimes ridiculous and always dangerous. As Arora reminds us in his book, history should be rewritten in light of newly understood facts and scientific evidence and not to further the supremacist fantasy of a particular group based on religion, politics, race or ethnicity.

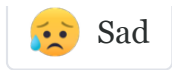
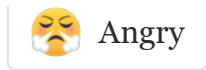
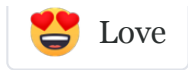
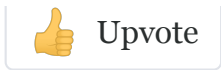
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Zac X • 5 months ago

It sounds like a fascinating book; thanks for the review.

I think Khajuraho has been exemplified as the "erotic deification" within Hinduism but just how influential was it?

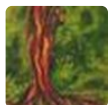
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Ruchira → Zac X • 5 months ago • edited

The erotic art on Indian temple walls was probably influenced by Tantric practices which are for the most part secretive. Their depictions therefore were not that common. Other than Khajuraho, the Sun Temple of Konarak in Odisha is the other well known site. There are a few more in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. I don't know of others. Not sure if the other major sun temple in Multan, now in Pakistan had similar art work. The fact that these artworks were present in some public places, does point to a more relaxed attitude towards erotica in certain communities of ancient India.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Sukrita Paul Kumar • 5 months ago

Not historical documentation, nor a mere tourist guide. Thanks for taking us through the book with such clarity... and yet the questions raised are intriguing and complex. The message is: go read the book to participate in the journey fully! And that I will do...

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Usha Alexander • 5 months ago

Quite enjoyed your review, Ruchira. It provides a tasty enticement to read the book!

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Namit • 5 months ago • edited

Thank you for this nice review, Ruchira! I'm so glad you enjoyed the book and took the time to write this. :)

Readers who wish to learn more about the book can check out its [official page](#) or my recent [one-hour lecture](#) based on it.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Ruchira • 2 months ago

Copying and pasting a comment by reader Kapil Ranade who was not able to jump over the hoops set in place by Disqus.

"Just finished reading the book earlier today - and immediately came through to read your review. If I were asked to write a cryptic 2 line review, I would say "Very good book; wrong title." Now let me expand on that a bit.

Innovative new approach to Indian history; telling the stories of great cities chronologically through time interspersed with tales of other travellers who saw the country through foreign eyes. Like looking at the coin from two sides - the self perception as seen through the material artefacts and the outsiders gaze - the two interacting to try and give a fuller picture.

A full picture of history though is always elusive, because when we have to go by are bits and pieces, impressions and images - a large jigsaw with more pieces missing than the ones in hand from which to try and assemble, infer, deduce a complete image. That complete image is always an imagined historiography dreamed through the gaze of the historiographer's zeitgeist. The book is sensitive to this the author does try to filter through bias of older narratives to bring out the nuances.

Each chapter then, exploring a place in time, is a self contained gem trying to weave together the current state of the art in a form consumable by the non specialist.

This is where the subtitle "A brief history of a civilization" shows it's limitations. The gems each beautiful and lustrous by itself are not set into a necklace - and while the cities and travelogues are broadly in chronological the chapters are not woven together to draw out the threads of continuity and evolution. Very likely this was intentional - but what this means is the book almost pre-supposes in the reader an existing familiarity with the flow of India history, and so, this may not be a good first book for someone new to Indian history. For most of us who have that background, the book breaks new ground and gives much to reflect upon.

I would in fact love a lavishly illustrated coffee table large sized version of this book - complete with full page photographs of the excavated cities described, artist impressions,

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