

# "Indians: A Brief History of A Civilization" by Namit Arora

[Peter Gordon 25 March 2021 Non-Fiction](#)



Namit Arora's *Indians* is, this non-Indian guesses, likely to be read somewhat differently depending on whether or not one is included in the title. For those who aren't, this is a readable and personable if perhaps idiosyncratic history structured as a travelogue.

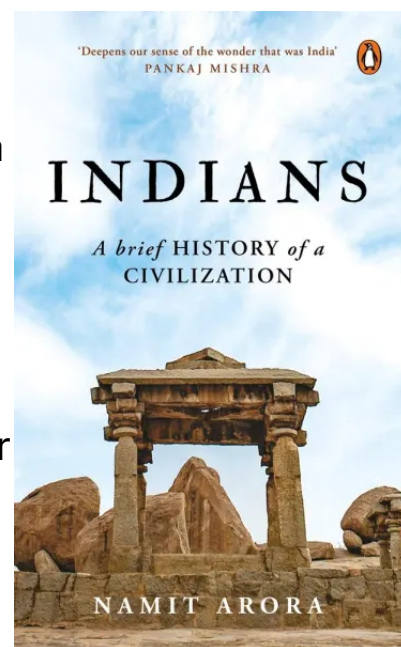
Arora makes eleven stops on his journey through almost 5000 years of history, from the Harappan site of Dholavira through 16th-century Vijayanagar at Hampi to contemporary Varanasi. The physical sites are interleaved with intellectual ones: communing with writers about India, from

the Greek Megasthenes, the Chinese monks Faxian, Xuanzang and Yijing through Marco Polo and the 17th-century François Bernier.

Indian history can—again, for the non-Indian, at least—seem kaleidoscopic: it can be hard to identify linear throughlines of the sort that characterize the history of the United States, Britain or even China. India, with its multiple polities, languages, scripts, religions, is more continent than country. In his careful selection of highlights, Arora manages to shape Indian history into something manageable, with a narrative arc that is graspable.

The title refers to the people rather than the country; the subtitle calls out civilization rather than nation.

That civilizational India doesn't map onto political India is evident from the start. Dholavira is not the best-known Harappan site: those are in Pakistan. This one, however, lies in India, on an island in a lake that abuts the border. Much of Tony Joseph's excellent [Early Indians](#) (cited here) deals with Harappa; Arora however walks us through an actual site and muses on what makes the Harappa civilization so intriguing: excellent civil engineering, international trade, shipping, an indecipherable script, little evidence of warfare, limited social hierarchy, and an apparent absence of wheeled vehicles within the city. It sounds too good to be true.



*Indians: A Brief History of a Civilization*, Namit Arora (India Viking, January 2021)

Several themes traverse the various episodes: one is the rise of caste, which Arora first finds in the description of the Mauryan empire of the late fourth century BCE by the Greek Megasthenes. The subject returns in most of the chapters. Late in the book, Arora approvingly quotes the “lower-caste poet-saint and shepherd, Kanaka Dasa” from Vijayanagar:

**To what caste does the soul belong?**

**To what caste do life and love belong?**

## **To what caste do the five senses belong?**

**If a soul is united with God, the Soul of Souls,**

## **What does caste have to do with it?**

Also important for Arora is the rise and then almost complete disappearance of Buddhism: a visit to the city of Vijayapura which flourished during the centuries straddling the turn of first millennium (tragically submerged when a dam was built) and the Buddhist monastery complex at Nalanda bookend a discussion of the Chinese monks Faxian, Xuanzang and Yijing who visited India in the 5th to early 7th centuries. "When Buddhism in India went into terminal decline around 800 CE and died out soon after 1200 CE, nearly all of its texts were lost forever": many Buddhist texts exist now only through their Chinese translations. In parallel, Arora traces the transition from Brahminism to Hinduism ("a colonial-era label, retroactively applied," he notes parenthetically). He is keen on contrasts: he stops off at Khajuraho, whose buildings are "famed for their explicit and finely carved erotica".

A third theme is "knowledge"; Arora is almost on a first-name basis with the main foreign writers about India. The Chinese monks are followed by the early 11th-century Persian traveller Alberuni (al-Biruni), who was not impressed with the state of learning in India; next up is Marco Polo. A good portion of the main textual sources for the southern Indian empire of Vijayanagara are foreign: Italian, Persian and Portuguese. François Bernier who was at the Mughal court for a decade in the mid-17th century is also given a chapter of his own:

**In his account, India seems to be in a state of intellectual decay, uncreative and stunted, ill- prepared against the advancing power of Europe's scientific method, mercantilism, scholarship and the nation-state model. He expressed fondness and affection for many people and things, but a good part of his account is an indictment of Indian society —though in ways that resonate aplenty with our own liberal**

## assessments today

Arora finishes up in Varanasi, an appropriate place for such a book to end. That Arora is himself an outsider—he lived much of his adult life in the US and Europe—as well as insider is clear from his conclusion:

**What better way to peer into nothingness and to see our common fate, evocatively laid out in the Book of Common Prayer: from earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Why, there is nothing morbid about death. It's a basic fact of life, but one that rarely informs our daily choices and opinions. The greatest wonder, as Yudhishthira says in the Mahabharata, is that 'each day death strikes, and we live as though we were immortal'.**

In this gentle book, Arora manages to outline the development of several strands of Indian religion as well as put down major political and cultural markers in an overall chronology. He makes little attempt to be definitive; indeed, he implies he considers himself a "storyteller". Arora is a deft writer: his excellent descriptions of the places he visits bring the reader along with him. Ancient is leavened with modern; the arcane made relevant. Academic historians may take issue with his approach, and others will surely say that he left many things out, but with *Indians* under one's belt, one is far better prepared for a more detailed and definitive work.

But if there's any country in which the past is neither dead nor even past, it's India. Arora's agenda, about which he's quite open in his introduction, is to push back against what he sees as manipulation or even fabrication of India's history for contemporary political ends:

**Unfortunately, historians can also be accomplices in political games. Some, more than others, interpret past events to favour a particular group. While it's true that no one owns history, some historians are clearly more partisan—like those who wilfully flout or conjure up evidence, or are led by a hegemonic sense of identity. Such history**

**writing—often zealously undertaken from what is defined as ‘our perspective’—is less about elevating scholarship, and more about honing majoritarian pride in a social group. Histories written from such insular points of view thrive by inflating the fears, resentments and tribal affinities in the reader—and exacerbate civil and communal strife.**

He’s a bit circumspect about his own sympathies, but it’s not hard to guess where they lie. Arora regardless manages to be both engaging and self-effacing:

**I’m not inclined to take pride in things I did not help create, but I do believe in celebration and wonder—and there is plenty in the Indian past worthy of both.**

I’m not sure who would ever have doubted that, but Arora’s own enthusiasm is infectious.

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