



A statue of a Hindu goddess. In Indian history, sex is not merely *there*, it is explicit, exuberant, and encyclopedic.

BOOKS

## India's Lost Worlds



BY MAX CARTER

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READING TIME: 4 MINUTES

INDIANS: *A BRIEF HISTORY OF A CIVILIZATION*

by Namit Arora

Of all the qualities the finest teachers possess and transmit, none is so precious as curiosity. In Graham Swift's novel *Waterland* (1983), the history master, Tom Crick, exhorts pupils to "be curious. Nothing is worse (I know it) than when curiosity stops. Nothing is more repressive than the repression of curiosity. Curiosity begets love. It weds us to the world. It's part of our perverse, madcap love for this impossible planet we inhabit. People die when curiosity goes."

Namit Arora, who spent two decades in information technology before turning to writing, evidently never stopped attending to his inner Crick. The happy result is *Indians: A Brief History of a Civilization*.

Arora interleaves his exploration—historical and personal—of six Indian sites, representing various regions, beliefs, periods, and people, with accounts of the subcontinent's keenest foreign observers, from the fourth-century-B.C. Greek envoy Megasthenes to the 17th-century French traveler-physician François Bernier.

His "lost worlds" have been excavated by others, yet no one has submitted them to such collective, enlightened inquiry.

Lost Worlds

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While *Indians* need not be read straight through—those interested in Varanasi’s timeless spirituality may be less captivated by the advanced water-management system of the apparently unmartial Harappans (third millennium B.C.)—common themes emerge. These are, in no particular order, high degrees of resourcefulness, intellectual exchange, religious fluidity, and, later, near-uniform partisan co-option.

The Harappan civilization, which Arora counts among the glories of the Bronze Age, occupied the Great Rann of Kutch, an arid, uninviting salt marsh in present-day Gujarat. The city of Dholavira, re-discovered in 1967, is marked by traces of its five reservoirs.

A lack of human remains, weapons, telltale depredation, and depictions of war, implying nonviolence, is belied by formidable walls. Further material evidence suggests domesticated animals, cultivation of grains, urban planning, systems of writing, weights and measurements, and flattened social hierarchy.

“If only *this* could fire up our modern nationalists,” writes Arora, “rather than whether or not the Harappans created the Vedas or spoke proto-Sanskrit.”

We should be grateful for the little that is left of Dholavira. The original location of Vijayapuri, the capital of the Ikshvaku dynasty (circa 220–320), in what is now Andhra Pradesh, was submerged by an urgent but no less unfortunate dam project in the 1960s.

Arora visits Nagarjunakonda, the nearby island where the Archaeological Survey of India (A.S.I.) reconstructed Vijayapuri’s monuments. In the kingdom’s third-century heyday, Vijayapuri traded with Rome—hence the 16-tiered amphitheater—and,

through its namesake monk-philosopher, Nagarjuna, made enduring contributions to Buddhist thought.

Subsequent stops on Arora's journey through the past illustrate his subjects' extraordinary range. One moment, he surveys the wonders of the medieval seat of Buddhist learning at Nalanda, in modern Bihar, and in the next, the contemporaneous erotic carvings of Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh.

A sort of Buddhist All Souls, Nalanda attracted the Silk Road scholar-traveler Xuanzang, who marveled, "Men of the highest ability and talent ... there are many hundreds whose fame has rapidly spread through distant regions."

Estimates of its population of resident teachers and students run from 3,000 to 10,000. "The day is not sufficient," continued Xuanzang, "for asking and answering profound questions. From morning till night they engage in discussion; the old and young mutually help one another." One can hardly say the same of collegiate life today.

Nalanda's ascetic, scholarly atmosphere was made possible by patronage and lay donations. Arora rejects the official guides' thinly supported narrative of Nalanda's "brutal and decisive end" at the hands of marauding Ghurids in the 13th century. Instead, he posits generational decay and depopulation stemming from loss of funding, increased isolation, and piecemeal attacks.

A "good guys and bad" tale of foreign invasion is more seductive, alas, and lies at the heart of sectarian conflict in India. The British justified rule—as Hindu nationalists do today—by disparaging their Muslim precursors, crediting Islam with the persecution of "native" Buddhist and Hindu elements.

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To understand Khajuraho, conversely, is to seek, as Devangana Desai did some four decades ago, an explanation for “the enigmatic presence of sex in the religious art of a culture that glorified austerity, penance and renunciation.”

Sex is not merely *there*, it is explicit, exuberant, and encyclopedic. Arora quotes the “unintentionally hilarious” first British reaction to Khajuraho’s pornographic sculptures: “The religion of the ancient [Hindus] could not have been very chaste if it induced people under the cloak of religion, to design the most disgraceful representation to desecrate their ecclesiastical erections. The palky bearers, however, appeared to take great delight at the sight of those to them very agreeable novelties, which they took good care to point out to all present.” “Erections” is apposite.

An inventory of Khajuraho’s “agreeable novelties” features bestiality, masturbation, orgies, gang bangs, oral sex, exhibitionism, and, Arora notes, “possibly even non-consensual or exploitative sex,” referring to the charming panel wherein “multiple men [bear] weapons while having sex with a woman.”

A typically fanciful guide tells Arora that, faced with widespread vows of celibacy, “the wise Chandela kings hatched an ingenious plan to ambush these unsuspecting men with erotica when they piously came to visit the temples. The titillation would raise their interest in sex and save society.” Another claims that the Mughal

emperor Aurangzeb was responsible for the temples' disrepair despite, by then, being shrouded in jungle. "No self-respecting guide," laments Arora, "ever says, 'I'm not sure.'"

*Indians* concludes with trips to Hampi and Varanasi. Arora's gracious empiricism is the through line, whether in passing critique of Diana Eck's book about the latter, *Banaras: City of Light* (1982), or in condemnation of the "cringe-inducing" Brahmanical morality tale of Raja Harishchandra. (For giving up his kingdom—"because a virtuous king can't refuse a Brahmin"—and selling his wife and son into slavery, Harishchandra is rewarded with an eternal place in heaven. Never mind how wife and son felt about the arrangement.)

"Too often, sadly," Arora observes, "the popular new narratives are dull, untrue, or driven by chauvinism." We must savor the exceptions.

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*Indians* is available at your local independent bookstore, on [Bookshop](#), and on [Amazon](#).

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