

Namit Arora, *Indians: A Brief History of a Civilization*, Penguin Viking, New Delhi, 2021, 304 pp., ISBN: 978-0670090433.

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I first got in touch with Namit Arora in 2010, when I was translating Amartya Sen's *The Argumentative Indian* into Romanian, and wanted to use Namit's words for a blurb. He was extremely kind and even helped me to understand many unknown (at that point) details about Indian culture. We remained in touch and became friends, and several years later, I received his book, *The Lottery of Birth: On Inherited Social Inequalities* (Three Essays Collective, 2017), a wonderful collection which shares some insights on undisclosed and sensible matters of Indian society, a book that could be used as a moral compass and a guide by the young people in India.

When I read the news about *Indians: A Brief History of a Civilization*, published at the beginning of this year by Penguin Viking, I knew I had to read it and wrote to Namit, asking for a copy. It came shortly, and it is simply amazing!

For someone working, for the last 10 years, on Indian studies as a passion transformed into an almost full time job, books on Indian history, culture, religions and Indian literature are extremely necessary in order to gain knowledge and to keep it up with the evolution of ideas in the field. You have to know as much as possible before sharing the information with your students, and for that you need to read both

classics and recent books, so that you can have your own point of view and could easily participate in a conversation.

When receiving Namit Arora's *Indians*, I already had a good idea on Indian history, and the incredible transformations this country supported during times. I also read some reviews praising Namit Arora's work, especially because he "researches like a scholar, travels like an adventurer, and tells the story of a civilization like a born storyteller." (Arvind Krishna Mehrotra) I had great expectations and, after reading the book, I'm pleased to say that *Indians* is the most wonderful and amazingly well written history of India I have ever read!

India, with its multiple languages, scripts, religions, cultures, interferences, and confluences, is more like a continent than a country. In his careful selection of themes, Namit Arora manages to shape Indian history into something manageable, into a story that could be told and understood by the most sensible reader. "Inseparable from every story is the storyteller's sensibility, shaped by her politics, identity and culture." (Introduction, p. 3) Yes, Namit Arora's book has a lot of sensibility! It also has a soul. As Peter Gordon wrote for *The Asian Review of Books*, "the title refers to the people rather than the country; the subtitle calls out civilization rather than nation." I believe this apparently random arrangement represents the soul of this volume. Or, as Namit himself writes:

"In my storytelling, I wish to promote neither pride nor shame in our past, but to increase understanding of the diverse and complex journeys of our ancestors. I see the past as a dynamic interplay of migration, conflict, mixing, coexistence and cooperation led by various existential motives. [...] At the end of the day, what will always make a 'better story' of the past is the reader's discernment in the present." (Introduction, pp. 5-6)

Eleven chapters zoom across nearly 5000 years of India's history, from the Bronze Age to the time of the Buddha, Mahavira and the early *Upanishads*; further to fascinating observations of Megasthenes, the Greek Ambassador in Pataliputra or Ashoka's work which transformed Buddhism into a pan-Asian religion. The ideas of Nagarjuna and the journeys of Chinese pilgrims in India, as well as contributions of Faxian, Xuanzang and Yijing and the beginnings of Nalanda University are important subjects for Namit Arora. All these are followed by the story of Alberuni, a brilliant scholar who spent thirteen years studying Indian culture, including the amazing Khajuraho caves who later became world famous and are visited by millions every year, even today. The sailings to Malabar Coast bring famous travelers to India, as Marco Polo, and Namit Arora highlights this fascinating encounter too. Many scholars spent important time in India, and Namit tells us the story of François Bernier, a French physician who spent 12 years in India, working at the court of Aurangzeb. The volume ends with Varanasi, the famous city situated on the banks of Ganga, "home to many major and minor faiths," a place deeply rooted into Indians collective mind.

Several themes traverse the various chapters of this volume: one is the rise of caste, a subject on which Arora also insisted in his previous volume. But here, in *Indians*, he agrees that

"The roots of the Indian caste system almost certainly trace back to the Aryan substrate. Further, patriarchal practices like Sati, too, appear to be a legacy of the Aryan substrate. Sati's earliest noted occurrence in India dates to the fourth century BCE, as recorded by two first-century-BCE writers, Diodorus Siculus and Strabo." (p. 36)

The rise and then almost complete disappearance of Buddhism is an important matter on which Namit Arora insists in his book. The story of

Buddhism appears in several chapters, and it could be told also because the involvement of Chinese monks Faxian, Xuanzang and Yijing, who visited India in the 5th to early 7th centuries, and studied Buddhism, at Nalanda, the famous monastery which became a world recognized university. Their stories remained unknown for centuries.

“This changed only after the travel writings of Faxian, Xuanzang and Yijing were discovered and translated by European Indologists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their eyewitness accounts of geography, society, customs, material life and religion greatly expanded our understanding of the Indian past.” (p. 76)

The Chinese monks are followed by the early 11th-century Persian traveller Alberuni (al-Biruni). Next famous traveller is Marco Polo. A series of Italians, Persians and Portugueses travellers are on the list of people who wrote about India and its customs, during times. Namit Arora seems particularly interested in the story of François Bernier, who was at the Mughal court for a decade in the mid-17th century. From Bernier we have a vivid description of India of those times:

“He wrote what is now a rare and insightful portrait of seventeenth-century India, decades before the arrival of European colonizers. [...] He expressed fondness and affection for many people and things, but a good part of his account is an indictment of Indian society.” (pp. 226-227)

Varanasi, an old city situated on the banks of Ganga, offers an appropriate ending to this book.

“Varanasi brims with religious mythologies. [...] Varanasi’s mystique has long attracted foreigners; many have left vivid accounts of the city. It is also associated with famous natives and sojourners like the Buddha, Jain Tirthankaras, Dhanvantari, Sushruta, Patanjali, Sankara, Ramanuja, Kabir,

Ravidas, Tulsidas, Nanak, Lakshmihai, Annie Besant, Premchand, Malviya and Radhakrishnan.” (p. 229)

Besides these famous writers, “Varanasi’s reputation for religious pluralism is empirically well-earned too,” as Arora writes. (p. 240) “In Hindu lore, anyone who dies and is cremated in Varanasi gains instant moksha.” (p. 249) This is, in fact, one well known image, often present in documentaries about Varanasi, or Banaras, sometimes called ‘the city of death’. Arora describes the whole process:

“Chants of ‘Ram Naam Sat Hai’ reverberate all day on both burning ghats. The bigger, Manikarnika, hosts fifty to sixty cremations a day, which happen round the clock. [...] The funerary process is simple and unadorned. (p. 250)

“Watching the spectacle on the burning ghats from the rooftop, I feel an invigorating calm. [...] The greatest wonder, as Yudhisthira says in the *Mahabharata*, is that ‘each day death strikes, and we live as though we were immortal’” (p. 256)

This is a true and simple conclusion for a wonderful journey through history of Indians, proud people who shaped the history of ideas, and world religions, and gave some of the most incredible stories of human civilisation.

Among the best things that this book accomplishes is that it drags the reader out of ancient, medieval and modern epochs, and offers him/her a place in the first row, where history is happening just in front of his/her eyes, and stories of the past are alive and full of meaning, even today.

Indians: A Brief History of Civilisation, remarkably written by Namit Arora, is an extensively researched social and cultural history of India, a necessary reading for all those interested in Indian studies. The volume is completed by an extensive Reference list and elaborated

notes, and it also contains a very useful Index. For all these, and so many other reasons, *Indians: A Brief History of Civilisation* is a pleasure to read.

I feel fortunate to be amongst the readers of this remarkable journey, and to visit the sites of India's civilizations. It's a reading journey I heartily recommend!

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