

'Indians: A Brief History of a Civilization' review: Modern day journeys into the past

Namit Arora explores how Indians lived, ate, loved, built, fought and made sense of the material, rational and spiritual world down the ages

[Seema Chishti](#)

Indians: A Brief History of A Civilization — mind you, *Indians*, not *India* — appears at first to be a fool's errand, but that is only till you jump on, dig in and take the full ride. Namit Arora started thinking about a large canvas of a book like this 17 years ago while ruminating about how cities just disappear — Machu Pichhu, Memphis, Mohenjo-daro among others. His bid to reflect on all that is lost but also that which remains, waiting to be rediscovered and unpacked, led to this book. The author's skills and the choice of technique allow such a mega-ambitious project to take shape and flow.

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There are chapters on six places: Dholavira (2600-1900 BCE), Nagarjunakonda (220-320 CE), Nalanda (425-1350 CE), Khajuraho (950-1250 CE), Hampi (1336-1565 CE) and Varanasi (from 800 BCE), and five chapters on travellers: Megasthenes, Faxian, Xuanzang and Yijing, Alberuni, Marco Polo and Francois Bernier — all fitting in to convey the broader picture of the way Indians lived, ate, loved, built, fought, were governed and made sense of the material, rational and the spiritual down the ages.

Visible coexistence

It's a technique surprisingly used less by writers of popular Indian history. India does lend itself to it, the history and the present coexist very visibly, even if uneasily sometimes and often hiding in plain sight. A travelogue could easily involve not just visiting them as they stand, but connect the places with the people who live there and travel across time through them. It is something Michael Wood deploys very successfully in his eminently readable (and watchable) *The Story of India*, or John Keay in his masterful work on India. Arora similarly makes his modern-day journeys central to the history story. Sometimes the past lingers in stories he hears and in practices that persist, but more often, in the sheer contrast with the past, as in Dholavira where Harappan forefathers did more to worry about water conservation than the present-day inhabitants.

The book's treatment of Khajuraho's erotic sculptures, the fusing of erotic with the religious and the snapping of the link later, typifies his style which makes this a comprehensive, informative and engaging account about India in just 258 pages. He tackles the philosophical questions posed between different schools of thought, those that emphasised the renunciatory and others that saw "spiritual growth as compatible and intertwined with success in love rather than opposites." He draws in philosophy, competing themes and ideas making the book as much about beads, pottery and food as it is about how Indians might have thought in times past. This ability to compress a complex discussion on people, places, things across thousands of years and yet never let the reader once think of it as a shallow journey is a hallmark of the book.

Arora's work assumes added significance as it comes at a time when so much about India's present, politics and everyday conversations is an angry shouting match about its history. It is more important when so much attention of mass-media and the state is about identifying all those it does not belong to. At a time like this, just sweeping in all and being attentive to all manners of Indians today is an act of defiance. The author is clearly not shy of discussing contentious issues.

Complex shades

His work gets right into the heart of many flaming debates. He examines if Aryans are home-grown (no, he concludes citing new research in genetics, science and languages), on differing ideas which had play here, of many forms of contemplation down the ages, of times when dark skin was sought after and even why modern India ended up building Nagarjuna Sagar over the ruins of Nagarjunakonda.

Observations by Chinese travellers and others from West Asia and Europe leaven the text, and they enhance the 'arc of the story'. The sense of wonder that *was* India (to steal from Basham) is a balm to those of us living in 2021 as it drives home all that *we could be*. "The lives of our ancestors", the book surmises, "were far more varied than what their material remains indicate", and that "history belongs to those whose creative works survive and vibrate in the minds of later historians."

Among the things that this book accomplishes is to drag the reader out of ancient, medieval and modern silos, and keep her away from just talk of conquests and invasions. All in all, *Indians* manages to escape what historian Johan Elverskog (quoted in the book) has termed the seduction of "a clear-cut narrative with good guys and bad", which "avoids entirely the complex shades of grey that most often colour the messy fabric of history."

On the contrary, the book goes straight for the messiness and is able to arrange it in all its splendour and "complex shades" which are far from "grey".

Only one thing rankles — why did Arora not pick a place with a distinctly Muslim or Christian imprint? Perhaps the reason is that there is no exclusive Muslim or Christian town that makes the point of the book, but the way the conversation is framed these days, and also in official commentary, priorities and new NCERT books, by picking Agra or travelling to Kodungallur, to the site of South Asia's first mosque, the author could have tackled the trickiest bone of contention amongst readers of India's history, and its present, head

on.

***Indians: A Brief History of a Civilization*; Namit Arora, Penguin Random House, ₹599.**

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