

# India

A History



John Keay

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# INDIA

A History: From the Earliest Civilisations to the Boom of the Twenty-  
First Century

JOHN KEAY



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# DEDICATION

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*For Tara*

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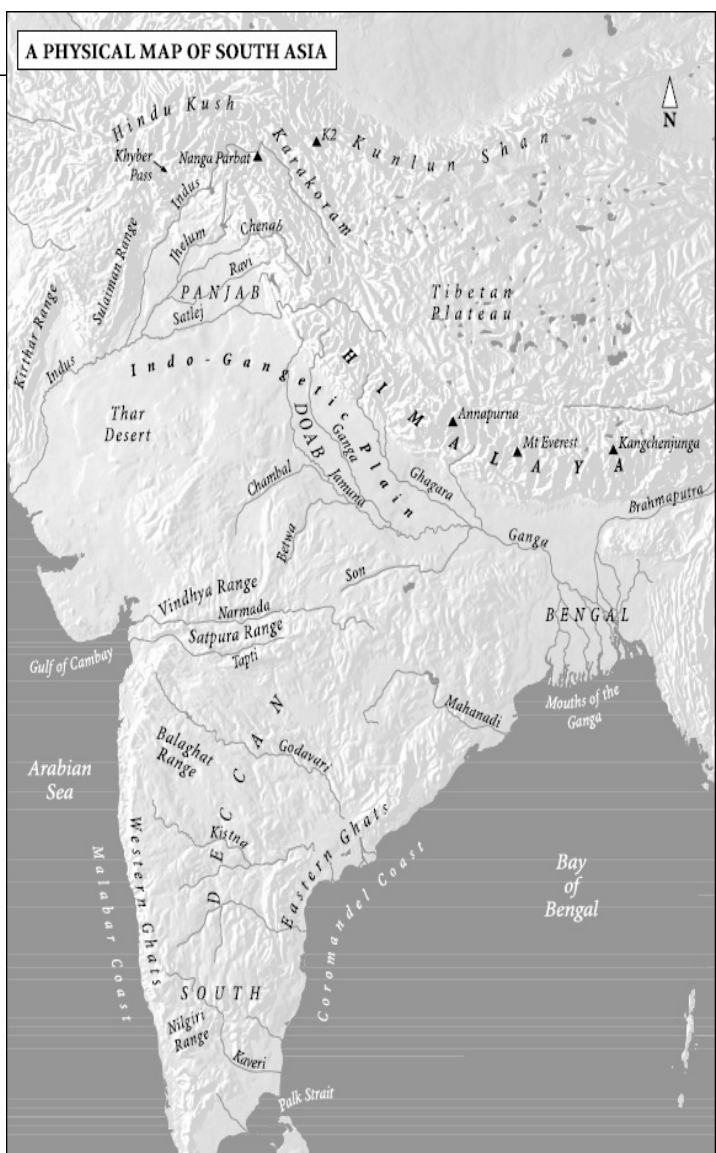
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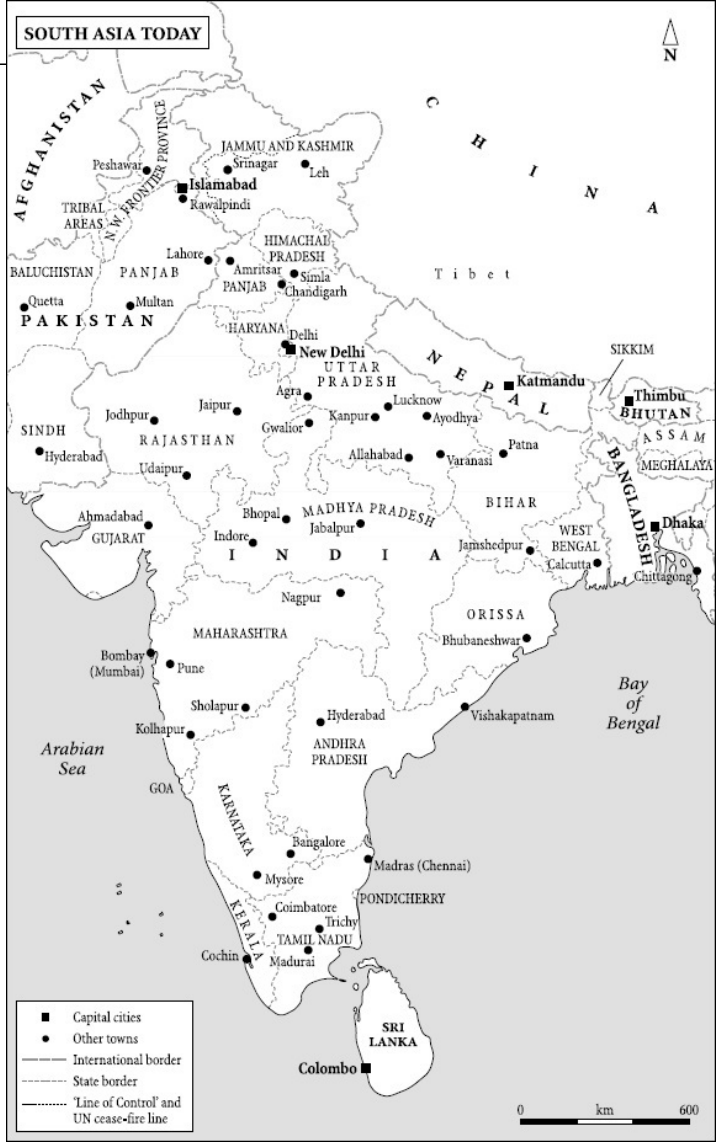
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A PHYSICAL MAP OF SOUTH ASIA



**SOUTH ASIA TODAY**



## AUTHOR'S NOTE TO THE SECOND EDITION

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When this book was first published in 2000 I had it in mind to write a sequel that would recount the events of the last fifty years in greater detail than was possible in a 5000-year history of the subcontinent. That project is at last under way. But working on it has made me even more aware of the cursory and selective nature of the final chapters in the first edition of *India*.

Ten years on, therefore, this new edition endeavours to make amends. As well as some updates and corrections to the original text, it contains an extensively rewritten chapter 19, a replacement chapter 20 and completely new chapters 21, 22 and 23. The narrative has been extended into the twenty-first century and an attempt made to compare the fortunes and explore the fraught relationships of all three of the post-Partition states – Pakistan and Bangladesh as well as India.

To anyone over sixty this will be more current affairs than history. It deals with events and personalities that may be familiar and it invites a more engaged and subjective treatment. Sadly it also lacks the authority that stems from a longer scholarly perspective. Much vital documentation remains unavailable for reasons of confidentiality or national security. Access to Pakistan's national archives, for instance, is so restricted that most histories of that country rely heavily on such documentation that can be consulted elsewhere, notably in the UK and the USA. Yet over-dependence on the reports and correspondence of foreign diplomats and observers may give a very false impression of decision-making within Pakistan's ruling establishment. Contemporary history is partial – in every sense. The new chapters at the end of this book are no exception.

I am grateful to Arabella Pike and Martin Redfern for making the new edition possible and to Essie Cousins, Georgia Mason, Peter James and others at HarperCollins for processing it. Many readers were kind enough to comment on the original edition. Though it has not been possible to do justice to all their suggestions, I thank everyone and look forward to more of the same.

John Keegan

Argyll  
January 2010

# INTRODUCTION

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HISTORIES OF INDIA often begin with a gripe about the poverty of the available sources. These sources were once thought so inadequate as to make what is certainly one of the world's longest histories also one of its more patchy. 'Prior to the thirteenth century AD,' wrote Professor R.C. Majumdar in the 1950s, 'we possess no historical text of any kind, much less such a detailed narrative as we possess in the case of Greece, Rome or China.'<sup>1</sup> Majumdar cited the thirteenth century because that was when northern India, succumbing to Muslim rule, attracted the attention of partisan writers keen to chronicle the triumphs of Islam. But given a good four thousand years of earlier pre-Islamic civilisation, it followed that for more than 80 per cent of attestable Indian history there were no histories.

'It is difficult to give a rational explanation for this deficiency,' continued Majumdar, 'but the fact admits of no doubt.' Rational explanations apart – and there have been many, most supposing an Indian indifference to treating antiquity as an academic discipline – this dearth of ready-made chronicles and memoirs weighed heavily on the historian. It handicapped his reconstruction of past events and hobbled his presentation of them in an acceptable narrative. His gentle readers were forewarned. A rough ride was in prospect.

Happily the situation has improved considerably over the last half-century. No unsuspected ancient chronicles have come to light but much new research has been undertaken and other disciplines have made important contributions. I have therefore stressed in the pages which follow those feats of discovery and deduction, the fortuitous finds and the painstaking analysis, whereby the documentary void has been gradually filled. While spiking the narrative with some lively debate, this explorational approach also has the advantage of mitigating my presumption in venturing gownless, onto the campus sward. History based on histories looks to be the province of professionalists but where so much of the past, even its chronology, has to be teased from less articulate objects like coins and charters, or pieced together from random inscriptions, titbits of oral tradition, literary compositions and religious texts, and where such researches are then usually consigned to specialised publications and obscure monographs, there surely must be need for an overview.

Reconstructing the past from such reluctant materials can be intensely exciting, but it is not easy. The ingenuity of those scholars who from rocks and runes, bricks and rubrics, have wrested one of the oldest and richest civilisations constitutes something of an epic in itself. It deserved to be told, and in a previous book I had endeavoured to do so in respect of mainly nineteenth-century scholarship.<sup>2</sup> But this is an ongoing epic of research which is itself part of India's history. As well as being directly responsible for revealing those distant personalities and events by way of which, like stepping stones, the historical narrative progresses, it also betrays much about the age to which the stepping stones supposedly led. More personally, since what we know has been derived so largely from research and so little from testimony, it seemed perverse not to credit the discoverers while appropriating their discoveries. What follows, therefore, is both a history of India and to some extent a history of Indian history.

I liked the idea that the variety of disciplines involved in this work of discovery – archaeology, philology, numismatics, phonetics, art history, etc. – seemed to admit the need for a generalist, and I hoped that the heavy ideological and religious distortions to which the findings have sometimes been subject might be countered by the reticence of a confirmed sceptic. Better still, thirty years

intermittent wandering about the subcontinent, reading about it and writing about it, could now be construed as other than pure indulgence. D.D. Kosambi, the most inspirational of India's historians, reckoned that for the restoration and interpretation of India's past the main qualification was willingness to cover the ground on foot. He called it 'field work'; and so it is.

The fields which Kosambi mainly quartered, and the inhabitants whom he questioned, belonged to a very small area around Pune (Poona) in Maharashtra. Freer to travel and drawn to more spectacular sites, I wanted to construct a history which took particular account of the country's extraordinary architectural heritage. Lord Curzon, the most incisive of British India's Viceroy's, hailed India's antiquities as 'the greatest galaxy of monuments in the world'. To all but scholars steeped in the glories of Sanskrit literature it is the architectural and sculptural wonders of India which provide the most eloquent testimony to its history. They stimulated its first investigation by foreign antiquarians and they continue to whet the curiosity of millions of visitors. A history which acknowledged the prominence of India's buildings and provided a political, economic and ideological context for them, looked to be useful.

Monuments also go some way towards compensating for that deficiency of historical texts. Of the Chola kings of Tamil Nadu, for instance, we would be poorly informed but for the great Rajarajeshwara temple, sublimely moored amidst acres of cloistered paving, which they built and maintained in eleventh-century Tanjore. From its inscriptions we learn of the Cholas' remarkable expeditions and of their lavish endowments; we even gain some insights into the organisation of the kingdom. But equally instructive is the sheer scale of their monument and the grandeur of its conception. Here, clearly, was a dynasty and a kingdom of some significance. To construct and endow India's largest temple, the Cholas must have commanded resources beyond those of their traditional wet-rice patrimony in the delta of the Kaveri river. In fact, were the temple devoid of inscriptions and were there no other clues as to its provenance, historians would surely have coined a name for its builders and have awarded them a dominion of either trade or conquest.

Buildings and sculptures so magnificent have done more than stimulate history-writing; they have sometimes hijacked it. Political and economic certainties being scarce while artefacts and literature, mostly of a religious nature, are plentiful, Indian history has acquired something of a religio-cultural bias. Whole chapters devoted to the teachings of the Buddha, the mathematical and musical theories of ancient India, or Hindu devotional movements are standard fare in most Indian histories. They are not without interest or relevance, and they conveniently bridge centuries for which the political record is deemed deficient or unbearably repetitive. But it might be hard to justify comparable digressions into, say, Greek drama or scholastic exegesis in a history of Europe.

The implication seems to be that Indian history, indeed India itself, has always been a place apart in which culture and religion often outdid armies and administrations in influencing the course of events. I remain unconvinced. Religious and cultural identities are important; but as a source of political differentiation and conflict they are not much in evidence in pre-Islamic India, were often exaggerated thereafter, and only became paramount during the last decades of British rule. Historically it was Europe, not India, which consistently made religion grounds for war and the state an instrument of persecution.

Whilst paying homage to architecture in particular, this is not, then, a cultural history of India, but alone a history of Indian cults. If it has a bias, it is in favour of chronology, of presenting such information as is available in a moderately consistent time sequence. This might seem rather elementary; but chronology is often a casualty of the interpretative urge which underlies much Indian history-writing. Whole centuries of no obvious distinction are cheerfully concertina-ed into oblivion.

while their few ascertainable productions are either anticipated in an earlier context or reserved for inclusion under some later heading. If, as many authorities now concede, the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, a manual of statecraft by the Indian Machiavelli, was not compiled in the fourth – third centuries BC then our whole idea of the nature of authority during the great ‘imperial age’ of the Maurya kingdom (C320–180 BC) needs revision. Likewise if Kalidasa, ‘the Indian Shakespeare’, did not coincide with the next ‘imperial flowering’ – and only circumstantial evidence suggests that he did – then the ‘golden age of the Guptas’ (C320–500 AD) begins to look somewhat tarnished.

Analysis thrives on a synchronism of evidence which, in such cases, is often hypothetical and contrived. Indeed Indian history is altogether perverse when it comes to clustering. A curious feature of that ‘galaxy of monuments’ is that comparatively few are located around major power centres. None can many certainly be credited to pan-Indian dynasties like the Mauryas and the Guptas. The exceptions are the newer cities of Delhi and Agra on which Sultans, Mughals and British all lavished their patronage. But at earlier power centres like Pataliputra (at Patna in Bihar) or ‘imperial’ Kanauj (near Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh), tangible evidence of the great empires which their Maurya, Gupta and Vardhana rulers claimed to control is scarce. Instead, for the earliest temples one must travel more ambitiously to Sanchi or Ellora, Kanchi or Badami, places hundreds of kilometres away in central India, the Deccan and the south.

The traditional explanation for this poor correlation between dominion and architectural extravagance held that Muslim iconoclasts demolished whatever temples and palaces adorned the earlier capitals of northern India. This may have been the case, especially with richly endowed religious centres like Varanasi (Benares) and Mathura (Muttra), but the fact remains that those temple clusters which do survive, as also the great palaces and forts of a later date, are attributable not to high-profile and supposedly all-India rulers like the Guptas or Harsha-wardhana but to lesser (because more localised) dynasties and to the merchants and craftsmen who lived under their protection.

These lesser dynasties, which flourished throughout India during the first and much of the second millennium AD, we know mainly from inscriptions. Unfortunately the inscriptions are couched in such oblique language, the claims they advance contain so much repetition and poetic exaggeration, and the kings and dynasties they mention are so numerous and so confusing, that most histories pay them scant attention. With perhaps twenty to forty dynasties co-existing within the subcontinent at any one time, it would be an act of intellectual sado-masochism to insinuate this royal multitude into a tendentious narrative, and I have not attempted to do so. But trusting to the reader’s indulgence, I have tried to convey the flavour of their inscriptions and to isolate those dynasties whose claims on our attention are substantiated by other sources or by still gloriously extant memorials.

Without some treatment of this long dynastic fray, gaping holes appear in the record. Compression and selection are the historian’s prerogative, but it is not self-evident, as per several current histories of India, that remote centuries may be ignored because ‘recency has a decided priority’.<sup>3</sup> My own experience as an intermittent correspondent and political analyst suggests exactly the opposite. Since most of today’s headlines will be on tomorrow’s midden, ‘recency’ is a deceptive commodity which the historian might do well to approach with caution. In this book, far from sharpening the focus on history, history blends into the foreground of current affairs, I have intentionally blurred it. Affairs still current are affairs still unresolved.

In contriving maximum resolution for the present, there is also a danger of losing focus on the past. A history which reserves half its narrative for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries may seem more relevant, but it can scarcely do justice to India’s extraordinary antiquity. Nor, simply because the British and post-colonial periods are better documented and more familiar, are they more

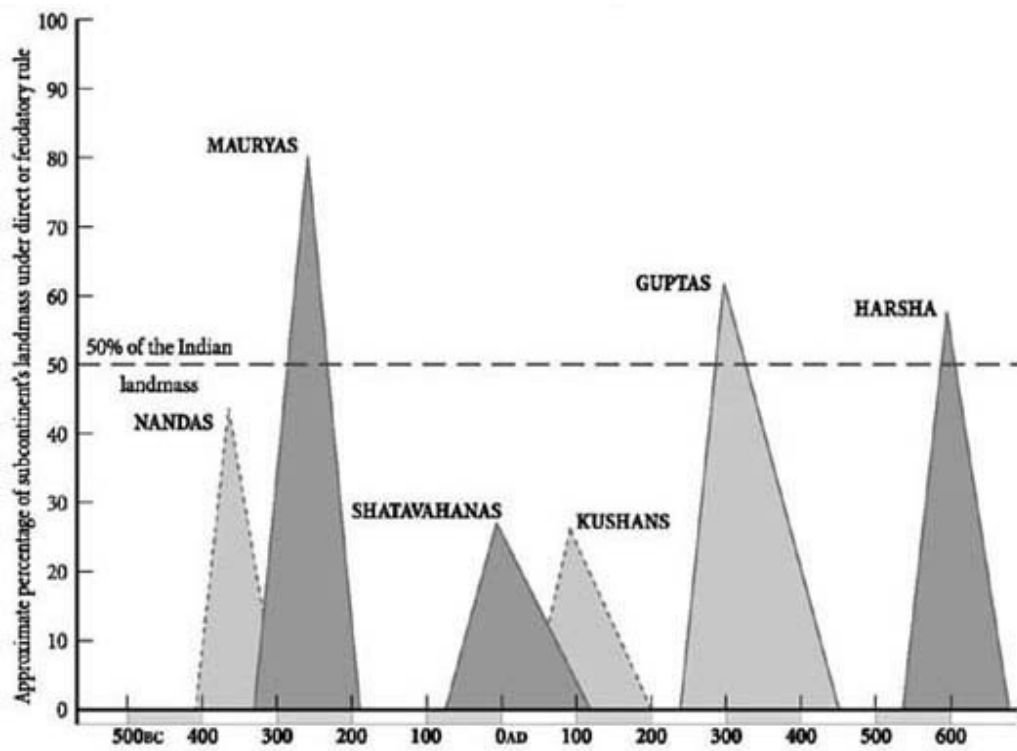
instructive. There lurks in contemporary-centrism an arrogance no less objectionable than that of Euro-centrism, Occidento-centrism or Christo-centrism. To my mind such selective editing diminishes history. In pillaging the past for fashionable perspectives on the present we deny the delightful inconsequence, the freak occurrences and the human eccentricities which enliven what otherwise is a somewhat sombre record. Honest dealing with the time-scale, as with the spatial environment, is not without its rewards.

If time is the locomotion of history, place could be the gradient against which it is pitted. Dynamic, the one hurtles forward; inert, the other holds it back. Not for nothing are unspoiled landscapes invariably billed as 'timeless'. Boarding at random an overnight train, and awaking twelve hours later to a cup of sweet brown tea and a dawn of dun-grey fields, the traveller – even the Indian traveller – may have difficulty in immediately identifying his whereabouts. India's countryside is surprisingly uniform. It is also mostly flat. A distant hill serves only to emphasise its flatness. Distinctive features are lacking; the same mauve-flowered convolvulus straggles shamelessly over the trackside wasteland and the same sleek drongos – long-tailed blackbirds – festoon the telegraph wires like a musical annotation. It could be Bihar or it could be Karnataka, equally it could be Bengal or Gujarat. Major continental gradations, like west Africa's strata of Sahara, sahel and forest or the North American progression from plains to deserts to mountain divide, do not apply. The subcontinent looks all of a muchness.

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### THE PEAKS AND TROUGHS OF DOMINION

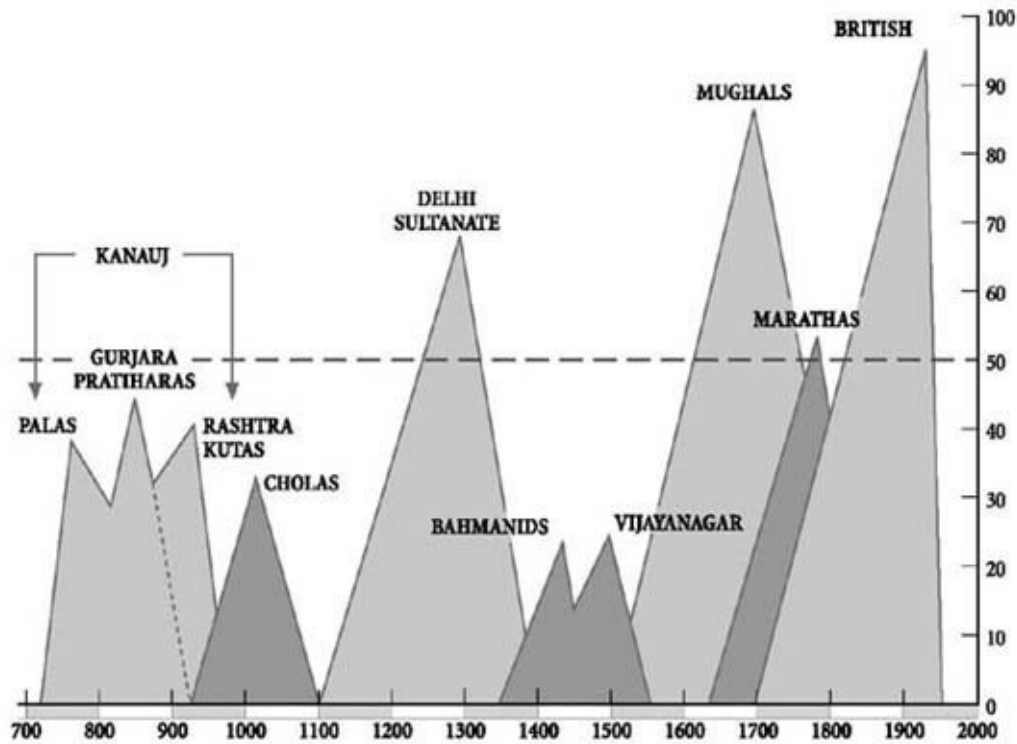
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There are, of course, exceptions; in India there are always exceptions, mostly big ones. The Himalayas, the most prominent feature on the face of the earth, grandly shield the subcontinent from the rest of Asia; likewise the Western Ghats form a long and craggy rampart against the Arabian Sea. Both are very much part of India, the Himalayas as the abode of its gods, the Ghats as the homeland of the martial Marathas, and both as the source of most of India's rivers. But it is as if these ranges have been pushed to the side, marginalised and then regimented like the plunging V of the south Asia

coastline, so as to clear, define and contain the vast internal arena on which Indian history has been staged.

An instructive comparison might be with one of Eurasia's other subcontinents – like Europe minus the erstwhile Soviet Union comprises about the same area as the Indian subcontinent (over four million square kilometres). But uniform and homogeneous it is not. Mountain chains like the Alps and the Pyrenees, plus a heavily indented coastline and a half-submerged continental shelf partition the landmass into a tangle of semi-detached peninsulas (Iberia, Scandinavia), offshore islands (Britain, Ireland) and mountain enclaves (Switzerland, Scotland). The geographic configuration favours separation, isolation and regional identity. Corralled into such natural compartments, tribes could become nations and nations become states, confident of their territorial distinction.



A diagrammatic chronology for the major dynasties giving approximate indication of their territorial reach

But if for Europe geography decreed fragmentation, for India it intended integrity. Here were no readily defensible peninsulas, no snowy barriers to internal communication and few waterways which were not readily crossable for much of the year. The forests, once much more widespread than today were mostly of dry woodland which afforded, besides shelter and sanctuary to reclusive tribes and assorted renunciates, a larder of exotic products (game, honey, timbers, resins) for the plains dwellers. Only in some peripheral regions like Kerala and Assam did this sylvan canopy become compacted into impenetrable rainforest. Wetlands also were once much more extensive. In what are now Bangladesh and Indian West Bengal, the Ganga (Ganges) and the Brahmaputra rivers enmesh to filter seawards into a maze of channels which forms the world's most extensive delta. Semi-submerged as well as densely wooded, most of Bengal made a late entry onto the stage of history. But wetlands, too, supplied a variety of desirable products, and during the dry summer months they contracted dramatically. Different ecological zones complemented one another, encouraging symbiosis and exchange. Nomads and graziers, seers and pilgrims, traders and troops might pass freely across the face of such congenial land. It seemed ready-made for integration and empire.



Climate decided otherwise. 'India is an amalgam of areas, and also of disparate experiences, which never quite succeeded in forming a single whole;'<sup>4</sup> only the British, according to Fernand Braudel, ever ruled the entire subcontinent; integration proved elusive because the landmass was too large and the population too numerous and diverse. But surprisingly, considering Braudel's emphasis on environments, he ignores a more obvious explanation. Settlement was not uniform and integration not easily achieved because what geography had so obligingly joined together, hydrography put asunder.

India enjoys tropical temperatures, yet during most of the year over most of the country there is no rain. Growth therefore depends on short seasonal precipitations, as epitomised by the south-west monsoon which sweeps unevenly across nearly the whole country between June and September. The pattern of rainfall, and the extent to which particular landscapes can benefit from it by slowing and conserving its run-off, were the decisive factors in determining patterns of settlement. Where water was readily available for longest, there agriculture could prosper, populations grow, and societies develop. Where not, stubby fingers of scrub, broad belts of desert and bulging plateaux of rock obtruded, cutting off the favoured areas of settlement one from the other.

Like lakes, long rivers with little fall, especially if their flood is prolonged by snow-melt as with the Ganga and the Indus, serve the purpose of conserving water well. Much of northern India relies on its rivers, although the lands they best serve, as also their braided courses and even their number, have changed over the centuries. Depending on one's chosen date, Indian history begins somewhere on the banks of north India's litany of great rivers – either along the lower Indus or amongst the 'five rivers' (*panj-ab*, hence Panjab, or Punjab) which are its tributaries, or in the 'two rivers' (*do-ab*, hence Doab) region between the Jamuna (Jumna) and the Ganga, or along the middle Ganga in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

North India's mighty river systems ordained much the most extensive of these well-watered zones of agricultural settlement; and though these zones were several, in the course of the first millennium BC they tended to become contiguous, thus creating a corridor of patchy cultivation and settlement from the north-west in what is now Pakistan to Bihar in the east. Here commercial exchange, cultural uniformity and political rivalry got off to an early start. The corridor became a broad swathe of competing states, cherishing similar ideals, revering common traditions and inviting claims of paramountcy. For empire-builders like the Mauryas, Guptas and Vardhanas, this was where the idea of Indian dominion began.

Elsewhere surface reservoirs supplemented rivers as a useful means of water conservation if the terrain permitted. In the deep south, weeks after Tamil Nadu's November rains have ceased, what looks from the air like chronic flooding proves to be a cunningly designed patchwork of fields with their sides so embanked as to form reservoirs, or 'tanks'. When, after carefully managed use and the inevitable evaporation, the water is nearly exhausted, the tank can itself be planted with a late rice crop. Since the peninsula lacks the vast alluvial plains of the north and has to accommodate hills like the Western Ghats, zones favourable to agricultural settlement were here smaller although numerous, and, in cases like the Kerala coast, exceptionally well watered.

In other regions geology did its best for moisture conservation by trapping water underground. From wells it could then be laboriously hauled to the surface for limited irrigation. For the intervening zones of greatest aridity, this sub-surface water was the only source available during most of the year. And since about half the subcontinent receives less than eighty centimetres of rain per year, these arid zones were large. By supposing a continuity between the western deserts of Sind/Rajasthan and the drier parts of central India plus the great Deccan plateau of the peninsula, a broad north – south divide has sometimes been inferred. In fact the terminology here is too vague (even the Deccan is more

designation of convenience than a natural feature). Moreover, considerable rivers traverse this divide: the Chambal and Betwa, tributaries of the Jamuna, afford north – south corridors between the Gangetic plain and the peninsula. And slicing across the waist of India, the west-flowing Narmada forms a much more obvious north – south divide; indeed it figures historically as something of an Indian Rubicon between the north and the peninsula. Micro-zones with excellent water conservation also dot both Rajasthan and the Deccan; in historical times they would sustain a succession of the most formidable dynasties.

As with the forests and wetlands, the dry-lands were not without their own sparser population, typically herdsmen and warriors. As barriers, dry regions are hardly as formidable as the seas and mountains of Europe. But as boundaries and frontier zones they did have something of the same effect, encouraging separation, fostering distinction and, in time, confronting ambitious rulers with the great Indian paradox of a land that invited dominion full of lesser rulers who felt bound to resist it.

The socio-cultural dimension to this climate-induced paradox would be even more enduring. Indeed it largely accounts for the strength of ‘regional’ sentiment in the subcontinent today. In those favoured, because well-watered, zones where settlement became concentrated, surplus agricultural production encouraged the development of non-agricultural activities. Archaeologists are alerted to this process by the distribution of more standardised implements, weapons and styles of pottery. These things also help in the identification of the favoured areas – most notably, and at different times, that great trail across the north from the Indus to the Gangetic basin, plus Gujarat, Malwa and the Orissan littoral in mid-India. In the south a similar diversification is inferred, although here the archaeological display-case remains somewhat empty. Save for a few Stone Age productions, southern India’s history has to wait until jump-started by a remarkable literary outpouring at the very end of the first millennium BC.

As crafts and trades prospered, specialisation encouraged congregation, and congregation urbanisation. Within the same favoured enclaves, ideological conformity, social stratification and political formation followed. The models for each – for an effective religion, a harmonious society and a legitimate state – married local elements and imperatives with a set of norms derived from the propagandised traditions of an Indo-Aryan people who had emerged in north India by 1000 BC. The Indo-Aryans were probably outsiders and, as well as a strong sense of community centred on elaborate rites of sacrifice, they possessed in the Sanskrit language an exceptionally versatile and persuasive medium of communication. Had India been as open and uniform a land as geography suggests, no doubt Sanskrit and its speakers would speedily have prevailed. They did do so over much of north India, but not speedily and not without compromise. Further afield, in west, east and central India and the Deccan, the process somewhat misleadingly known as ‘Aryanisation’ took even longer and involved so much compromise with local elements that hybridisation seems a fairer description. From it emerged most of the different languages and different social conformations which, heightened by different historical experiences, have given India its regional diversity, and which still distinguish the Bengali from the Gujarati or the Panjabi from the Maratha.

The pantheon of spirits and deities worshipped in each zone, or region, typified this process of hybridisation, with Indo-Aryan gods forsaking their original personae to accommodate a host of local cults. Thus did Lord Vishnu acquire his long list of *avatars* or ‘incarnations’. In parts of India the process of divine hybridisation is still continuing. Every year each village in the vicinity of Pudukottai in Tamil Nadu commissions from the local potter a large terracotta horse for the use of Lord Ayanar. Astride his splendid new mount, Ayanar will ride the village bounds at night, protecting the crops and warding off smallpox. But who is this Ayanar? None other than Lord Shiva, they tell you. The pan-

Indian Shiva, himself an amalgam of various cults, looks to be only now in the process of usurping the Tamil Lord Ayanar. But it could be the other way round. To the people of Pudukottai it is Ayanar who is assuming the attributes of Shiva.

As with gods, so with the different languages spoken in India's zonal regions. In its earliest form Marathi, the language now mainly spoken in Maharashtra, betrayed Dravidian as well as Sanskrit features. At some point a local form of early Dravidian, a language family now represented only in the south, is thought to have been overlain by the more prestigious and universal Sanskrit. But the precedence as between local indigenous elements and Sanskritic or Aryan influences is not clear. Did Sanskrit speakers domiciled in Maharashtra slowly absorb proto-Dravidian inflexions? Or was that the other way round?

A more clear-cut example of Aryanisation/Sanskritisation is provided by the many attempts to replicate the topography featured in the Sanskrit epics. By word of mouth core elements of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* had early penetrated to most of India. By the late centuries of the first millennium BC, even deep in the Tamil south they knew of the Pandava heroes who had fought the great Bharata war for hegemony in the Ganga-Jamuna Doab and of Rama and Lakshmana's expedition from Ayodhya to rescue the Lady Sita. Clearly these stories had a universal appeal, and in a trail of still recognisable place-names their hallowed topography was faithfully adopted by far-flung rulers anxious to garner prestige. The trail of 'Ayodhyas', 'Mathuras', 'Kosalas', 'Kambojas' and so on would stretch way beyond India itself, most notably into areas of Indian influence in south-east Asia. And like that hybridisation of deities, it continues. In Karnataka a Kannada writer complained to me that, despite the best efforts of the state government in Bangalore to promote the Kannada language, villagers still persisted in Sanskritising the names of their villages in a bid for greater respectability, then lobbying the Post Office to recognise the change.

As well as renaming local sites and features, some kings actually tried to refashion them in accordance with the idealised models and layouts of Sanskrit literary tradition. The Rashtrakuta ruler of eighth- to tenth-century Maharashtra evidently conceived their sculpted temple-colossus at Ellora as a replica of the Himalayas. It was named for Shiva as Lord of Mount Kailas (a peak now in Tibet) and was provided with a complement of Himalayan rivers in the form of voluptuous river deities like the Ladies Ganga and Jamuna. In a bid to appropriate the same sacred geography the great Cholas went one better, and actually hauled quantities of water all the way from the Ganga, a good two thousand kilometres distant, to fill their temple tanks and waterways around Tanjore. Thus was authenticated their claim to have recreated the north Indian 'holy land' in the heart of Tamil Nadu.

Geography, like history, was seen as something which might be made to repeat itself. In tableaux like that of the Taj Mahal the Mughal emperors strove to realise the Islamic ideal of a paradise composed of scented verdure, running water and white marble. Later, in leafy hill-stations, the British aimed at recreating their own idealised environment of green gables and lych-gated churchyards connected by perilous pathways and fuchsia hedges; new names like 'Annandale' and 'Wellington' were added to the map; existing nomenclatures were bowdlerised and anglicised.

Now they are being vernacularised. This is a confusing time for both visitors to India and those who write about it. With the process of revision far from complete, the chances of finding spellings and appellations which are recognisable and acceptable to all are slim. At the risk of offending some, I have continued to call Mumbai 'Bombay', Kolkota 'Calcutta' and Chennai 'Madras'; to non-Indians these names are still the more familiar. On the other hand I have adopted several spellings – for instance 'Pune' for Poona, 'Awadh' for Oudh, 'Ganga' for Ganges, 'Panjab' for Punjab – which may not be familiar to non-Indians; they are, however, in general use in India and have become standard.

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~~For anyone ignorant of both Sanskrit and Persian, transliteration poses another major problem.~~ Again, I lay no claim to consistency. For the most part I have kept the terminal 'a' of many Sanskrit words (Rama for Ram, *Ramayana* for *Ramayan*, etc.) and used 'ch' for 'c' (as in Chola) and 'sh' for 's' for most of the many Sanskrit 's's (Vishnu for *Visnu*, Shiva for *Siva*, Shatavahana and Shaka for *Satavahana* and *Saka*). The knowledgeable reader will doubtless find many lapses for which the author, not the typesetter, is almost certainly responsible – as indeed he is for all the errors and omissions, the generalisations and over-simplifications, to which five thousand years of tumultuous history is liable.

## The Harappan World

C3000–1700 BC

### THE BREAKING OF THE WATERS

IN HINDU TRADITION, as in Jewish and Christian tradition, history of a manageable antiquity sometimes said to start with the Flood. Flushing away the obscurities of an old order, the Flood served a universal purpose in that it establishes its sole survivor as the founder of a new and homogeneous society in which all share descent from a common ancestor. A new beginning is signalled; a lot of begetting follows.

In the Bible the Flood is the result of divine displeasure. Enraged by man's disobedience and wickedness, God decides to cancel his noblest creation; only the righteous Noah and his dependants are deemed worthy of survival and so of giving mankind a second chance. Very different, on the face of it, is the Indian deluge. According to the earliest of several accounts, the Flood which afflicted India's people was a natural occurrence. Manu, Noah's equivalent, survived it thanks to a simple act of kindness. And, amazingly for a society that worshipped gods of wind and storm, no deity receives mention.

When Manu was washing his hands one morning, a small fish came into his hands along with the water. The fish begged protection from Manu saying 'Rear me. I will save thee.' The reason stated was that the small fish was liable to be devoured by the larger ones, and it required protection till it grew up. It asked to be kept in a jar, and later on, when it outgrew that, in a pond, and finally in the sea. Manu acted accordingly.

[One day] the fish forewarned Manu of a forthcoming flood, and advised him to prepare a ship and enter into it when the flood came. The flood began to rise at the appointed hour, and Manu entered the ship. The fish then swam up to him, and he tied the rope of the ship to its horn [perhaps it was a swordfish], and thus passed swiftly to the yonder northern mountain. There Manu was directed to ascend the mountain after fastening the ship to a tree, and to disembark only after the water had subsided.

Accordingly he gradually descended, and hence the slope of the northern mountain is called Manoravataranam, or Manu's descent. The waters swept away all the three heavens, and Manu alone was saved.<sup>1</sup>

Such is the earliest version of the Flood as recorded in the *Satapatha Brahmana*, one of several wordy appendices to the sacred hymns known as the Vedas which are themselves amongst the oldest religious compositions in the world. Couched in the classical language of Sanskrit, some of the Vedas date from before the first millennium BC. Together with later works like the *Brahmanas*, plus the two great Sanskrit epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, they comprise a glorious literary heritage whence all knowledge of India's history prior to C500 BC has traditionally been derived.

Brief and to the point, the story of Manu and the Flood served its purpose of introducing a new progenitor of the human race and, incidentally, explaining the name of a mountain. Such, however, was too modest an interpretation for later generations. Myth, the smoke of history, is seen to signify new and more relevant meanings when espied from the distance of later millennia. In time the predicament of the small fish liable to be devoured by larger fish became a Sanskrit metaphor for an anarchic state of affairs (*matsya-nyaya*) equivalent to 'the law of the jungle' in English. Manu's flood, like Noah's, came to be seen as the means of putting a stop to this chaos. And who better to orchestrate matters and so save mankind than Lord Vishnu? A minor deity when the Vedas were composed, Vishnu had since soared to prominence as the great preserver of the world in the Hindu pantheon and the second member of its trinity. Thus, in due course, the Flood became a symbol of order-out-of-chaos through divine intervention, and the fish (*matsya*) came to be recognised as the first of the nine incarnations (*avatara*) of Lord Vishnu. Myth, howsoever remote, serves the needs of the moment. So does history, in India as elsewhere.

Some historians have dated the Flood very precisely to 3102 BC, this being the year when, by elaborate computation, they conclude that our current era, the *Kali Yug* in Indian cosmology, began and when Manu became the progenitor of a new people as well as their first great king and law-giver. It is also the first credible date in India's history and, being one of such improbable exactitude, deserves respect.

Other historians, while conceding the importance of 3102 BC, have declared it to be not the date of the Flood but of the great Bharata war. A Trojan-style conflict fought in the vicinity of Delhi, the war involved both gods and men and was immortalised in the Sanskrit verse epic known as the *Mahabharata*, the composition of whose roughly 100,000 stanzas constituted something of an epic in itself. This war, not the flood, was the event that marked the beginning of our present era and must, it is argued, therefore belong to the year 3102 BC. Complex astronomical calculations are deployed in support of this dating, and an inscription carved on a stone temple at Aihole in the south Indian state of Karnataka is said to confirm it.

But the Aihole memorialist, endowing his temple 1600 kilometres from Delhi and nearly four thousand years later, may have got it wrong. According to the genealogical listings in the *Puranas*, a later collection of 'ancient legends', ninety-five generations passed away between the Flood and the war; other evidence based on sterner, more recent, scholarship agrees that the war was much later than the fourth millennium BC. This greatest single event in India's ancient history, and the inspiration for the world's longest poem, did not occur until 'C1400 BC' according to the *History and Culture of the Indian People*, a standard work of many volumes commissioned in the 1950s to celebrate India's liberation from foreign rule and foreign scholarship.

Nevertheless, 3102 BC sticks in the historical gullet. Such are the dismal uncertainties of early Indian chronology that no slip of the chisel is going to deny the historian the luxury of a real date. Corroboration of the idea that it may, after all, apply to a Flood has since come from the excavations in distant Iraq of one of Mesopotamia's ancient civilisations. There too archaeologists have found evidence of an appalling inundation. It submerged the Sumerian city of Shuruppak, and has been dated with some confidence to the late fourth millennium BC. In fact, 3102 BC would suit it very well.

This Sumerian inundation, and the local Genesis story in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* which probably derived from it, is taken to be the origin of the legend of the Flood which eventually found its way into Jewish and Christian tradition. Yet in many respects the Sumerian account is more closely echoed in the Indian version than in the Semitic. For instance, just as in later Hindu tradition Manu's fish becomes an incarnation of the great god Vishnu, so the Sumerian deity responsible for saving mankind

is often represented in the form of a fish. 'It is the agreement in details which is so striking according to Romila Thapar.<sup>2</sup> The details argue strongly for some common source for this most popular of Genesis myths, and scholars like Thapar, ever ready to expose cultural plagiarism, see both Manu and Noah as relocated manifestations of a Sumerian prototype.

The tendency to synchronise and subordinate things Indian to parallel events and achievements in the history of countries to the west of India is a recurrent theme in Indian historiography and has rightly incurred the wrath of some Indian historians. So much so that they sometimes go to the other extreme of denying that any creative impetus, any technological invention, even any stylistic convention, ever reached India from the west – or, indeed, the West. And in the case of the Flood there may have a point. Subject to the annual deluge of the monsoon and living for the most part on the flood alluvial plains created by notoriously errant river systems, the people of north India have always had far more experience of floods, and far more reason to fear them, than their neighbours in the typically more arid lands of western Asia.

Floods, though now associated more with the eastern seaboard of the Indian subcontinent and Bangladesh, still annually inundate vast areas of the Ganga and Indus basins. They have always done so. One such Gangetic flood, dated by archaeologists to about 800 BC, destroyed the town of Hastinapura which, after the great Bharata war, had become the capital of the descendants of Arjuna, one of the war's main protagonists. Since the flooding of Hastinapura is also recorded in Sanskrit textual tradition, and since the same tradition says that the town was then under its seventh ruler since the war, an approximate date for the war itself of about 975 BC has been postulated.

Thus, for the titanic struggle recorded in the *Mahabharata*, we already have three dates: 3102 BC, C1400 BC and C950 BC. A couple of millennia one way or the other is a long time even in prehistoric terms. India's history, though undoubtedly ancient, leaves much room for manoeuvre. A mistranslated word from one of the many voluminous, difficult and defective texts wherein, long after the composition, the Vedic verses were eventually written down, can create havoc. Similarly a chance discovery of no obvious provenance can prompt major revisions.

Another flood, later than the Sumerian one but much earlier than that at Hastinapura and perhaps a serious contender for the one which Manu survived, is thought by some to have once inundated the plains of the lower Indus in what is now Pakistan. Geologists date it to some time soon after 2000 BC, and believe that it may in fact have been a succession of inundations. Whether they were the result of climate change, of tectonic action lower down the river resulting in damming and the formation of inland lakes, or simply the cumulative effect of annual siltation is not clear. But whatever the cause, the floods were bad news for those agriculturalists who had pioneered a highly productive economy based on growing cereals in the fine soil alongside the river. Managing the river's seasonal rise so as to enrich and irrigate their fields was the key to their success. An annual surplus had generated wealth, encouraged craft industries and fostered trade. Settlements had become cities. Along the lower Indus and its tributaries had grown up one of the world's first urban societies, contemporary of those on the Nile and the Euphrates and a rival for the tag of 'the cradle of civilisation'.

Then, soon after 2000 BC according to the archaeologists, came the floods. If they did not actually overwhelm this precocious civilisation, they certainly obliterated it. In time, layer after layer of Indus mud, possibly wind-blown as well as water-borne, choked the streets, rotted the timbers, and piled high above the rooftops. The ground level rose by ten metres and the water table followed. Meanwhile the river resumed its regular flow and found new channels down which to flood. On top of the cities, now consigned to oblivion beneath tons of alluvium, other peoples grazed their goats, sowed

their seeds and spun their myths. A great civilisation was lost to memory.

Not until nearly four thousand years later, in fact in the early 1920s, was its existence even suspected. It was pure chance that Indian and British archaeologists, while investigating later more visible ruins at Mohenjo-daro in Sind and at Harappa in the Panjab, made the prehistoric discovery in the twentieth century. They called their find the 'Indus valley civilisation', and drew the obvious comparisons with those of Egypt and Sumeria. Indeed they thought that it might be an offshoot of the latter. Later, as its sophisticated and surprisingly uniform culture became more apparent, the Indus valley civilisation was accorded distinct status. And when the extent of its cultural reach was found to embrace a host of other sites, many of them well beyond the valley of the Indus, it was renamed after one of these sites as the Harappan civilisation.

Suddenly India's history had acquired a rich prehistoric pedigree of archaeologically verifiable antiquity. Here, it seemed, was a worthy companion to that Sanskrit literary heritage of equal impressiveness, though maddeningly uncertain, antiquity as comprised by the Vedas and associated texts, the *Brahmanas* and *Puranas* as well as epics such as the *Mahabharata*. Perhaps these two very different sources, the one purely archaeological and the other purely literary, would complement one another. An ancient and immensely distinguished civilisation would thus be revealed in multidimensional detail.

The Harappan finds included buildings, tools, artefacts, jewellery and some sculpture. Intimate details about Harappan housing, diet, dentistry and waste disposal came to light. Maritime trade with Sumeria was attested and led to some cross-dating. The Carbon 14 process produced comparatively accurate dates accurate to plus or minus a century or so. Amongst the Harappans there was even what looked like a system of writing: some four hundred characters were identified, each, it was deduced, representing a single word; and they read from right to left. Sanskritists were soon clear that this was not Sanskrit, the language of the Vedic heritage. But it might be some kind of proto-Dravidian, the parent of south India's languages, while the script did suggest similarities with Brahmi, the earliest Indian script hitherto identified and read. It seemed only a matter of painstaking study before the Harappan language would be understood and the secrets of its civilisation revealed.

Unfortunately this script, despite the best endeavours of international scholarship and despite the code-cracking potential of computers, remains undeciphered. Totally lacking, therefore, is any intelligible record of the Harappans written by themselves. Who were they? What did they worship? Had they established a recognisable state or states? They tell us nothing. How did they come to be there? And what became of them in the end? We don't know. Here was history complete with approximate dates, cities, industries and arts, but absolutely no recorded events. Here too was a society with a distinct and extensive culture but, barring some not very helpful bones, no people indeed without a single name.

Names, on the other hand, were precisely what that Sanskrit literary tradition of the Vedas provided – in mind-boggling abundance. Kings and heroes, gods and demons, places and people tumble from the Vedas, *Brahmanas*, *Puranas* and epics as if ready-made for the compilation of a historical index. Although no single site, no potsherd or artefact, can certainly be identified with the people who composed these verses, and although their chronology remains shrouded in the maddening uncertainty, we know that they called themselves *arya* – hence 'Aryan' – and we know of their lifestyle, their social organisation, their beliefs and their innumerable antecedents and descendants. Here, in short, was a people proudly obsessed with the past, who defined themselves in terms of lineages reaching back through the generations to Manu, and whose records might therefore provide for the enigmatic Harappan civilisation precisely the human detail that it so notably lacked.



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