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The Uneven Journey of a Civilisation

By: Kumkum Roy

The complex pasts of the subcontinent come together usefully in a volume for the lay reader.

The Indians represents an ambitious attempt to synthesise the complex pasts of the inhabitants of our subcontinent. The range is daunting. The volume begins with human evolution, and traces developments through the emergence and decline of the Harappan civilisation, through the Vedic evidence, ancient languages and philosophical traditions, regional traditions that emerged during the medieval period, colonialism, the possibilities of federalism and the emergence of significant socio-political movements in the 20th century, ending with a discussion on the near-contemporary scenario since Independence.

Consisting of over a hundred essays, contributed by about 90 scholars, it is organised in seven parts within a vast chronological framework. Inevitably, the volume is exciting, uneven and with some amount of repetition.

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The strengths and weaknesses of the project are exemplified by the first part, which discusses human origins, and the phases/ stages in which the subcontinent was populated, as well as the earliest archaeological evidence, sparse as it is. We find fairly lucid syntheses of the present understanding of population movements in the past. There are summaries of the past histories of the earth, which sometimes border on the cryptic, even as they are invaluable in terms of information. We have glimpses of the rich and complex archaeological evidence from these earliest phases of human history. Yet, while the Anthropocene figures in the discussion, there is an unmistakable strand of unproblematised anthropocentrism which perhaps needs to be revisited, given our present historical location.

Some contributions summarise what is common knowledge, easily available in school books. Having said that, it is possible that school books of the future may not address these issues, or, if they do so, may resort to what G.N. Devy describes as “fantasy, hallucination and wishful nostalgia” (p. xvii), so such summaries will find their uses.

The second part, on the ‘Foundations, emergence, and the decline of civilization’ straddles several crucial millennia and includes some excellent syntheses, remarkable for their clarity, breadth, and depth. K. Paddayya introduces us to hunting-gathering societies, providing a critical historiographical survey, a sense of change and continuity, and vivid details that bring this generally neglected phase of history to life. Ravi Korisettar maps as many as eleven nuclei of agricultural settlements that emerged in different parts of the subcontinent between c. 7,000 and 2,000 BCE. He provides a sense of the diversity within the subcontinent as well as links with the wider world, along land and sea routes.

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Sudeshna Guha looks at the strategies underlying the analysis of the archaeological evidence of the Harappan civilisation is illuminating, even as it presupposes that the reader is familiar with the evidence. Rajesh Kochhar’s demanding and detailed discussion on the Sarasvati river focuses on the complications in identifying rivers and tracing their histories. Published posthumously, it cautions against facile identifications that might serve immediate political agendas.

The reader is introduced to a range of languages and textual traditions in the third part, on the ‘Language mix and philosophies in ancient India’. Hans Henrich Hock’s masterly summary of the relationship between Sanskrit and other Indo-European language is rich in detail and refreshing in its restrained clarity. A second contribution by him provides a sober assessment of the evidence for ancient Indian achievements in medicine, astronomy, mathematics, and grammar. Madhav Deshpande maps the many registers within Sanskrit and their relationship with Prakrits. Two short and succinct essays on Buddhism and Jainism complement each other.

Given that the almost two millennia of history encompassed within this part witnessed significant developments in architecture, sculpture, and other fields, one wishes that at least some attempt had been made to engage with them. These traditions as rich in terms

of diversity as the linguistic and intellectual traditions that receive attention. Produced by craft persons, whose discoveries and practices may or may not have been documented, they were perhaps more accessible to non-literate populations than some of the abstract ideas that circulated within textual traditions.

The fourth section, on 'Cultures, sub-nationalities, and region' – the largest in the volume – challenges commonsensical perceptions of the histories of the subcontinent by inaugurating the discussion with developments in south India. The contributions highlight the complex webs of religious, linguistic, political, and cultural traditions that were characteristic of this long millennium in different parts of the subcontinent, without erasing histories of often violent conflict.

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Manu Devadevan's insightful discussion on the historiography of medieval Karnataka draws attention to the distinct and not necessarily congruent concerns of scholarship in Kannada and English. One suspects that his thought-provoking intervention would be true of other regions as well. Following a rather different strategy, Bhukhya Bhangya attempts to map the diversities – religious, social, cultural, linguistic, and aesthetic – that he identifies as being typical of Telangana, although many of these are evident in the other regions as well.

It is evident that many of the contributors to this and other sections of the book faced the unenviable task of presenting a coherent account of several centuries (and occasionally millennia) of historical change. Amongst those who accomplish this near impossible feat are Aparna Kapadia and Arupjyoti Saikia, whose accounts of Gujarat and Assam respectively address complexities. They move beyond a listing of linguistic elements, textual traditions, and religious diversities to contextualise these within a broader framework of political change and economic developments, including long-distance exchange.

A relatively short section on 'Colonialism' includes brief, useful summaries on the debates about its economic and cultural impact, as well as diverse responses to the colonial encounter. What is refreshing is the way the last contribution in this section flows into the next section, where the discussion on socio-political movements, including the national movement begins with those of the Adivasis. While most of the contributions are marked by empathy for those who resisted colonialism and dreamt of wider transformations in society, some, such as Tridib Suvrud's piece on Gandhi, are more successful than others. Vinay Lal's contributions, likewise, effectively weave complicated strands of history into a coherent narrative.

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The last section grapples with the near contemporary. While there is some amount of overlap with the preceding section, some contributions foreground issues of identity politics and the ways in which these have shaped our present worlds. Lal's thoughtful and substantial 'Afterword', with which the volume ends, contextualises both the nation-state and our understanding of civilisation.

Given that the volume is meant to meet the needs of lay readers, there are some problems that I would like to flag, which can hopefully be addressed in a new edition. Some contributions are interesting, but the logic of their inclusion remains unclear. This holds true of Manan Ahmed's contribution on Sindh and Thomas Trautmann's discussion on scripts and languages. Similarly, Jennifer Bates' discussion on urbanism is useful, but seems incongruous in the section where it is placed, which pertains to an earlier phase than the early historic urbanism which is her primary focus. The placement of Narayani Gupta's lucid overview of urban worlds, which ranges from the earliest times to the present, towards the end of the volume is also surprising. Also, while one appreciates the constraints of space, it is unfortunate that some of the articles are concise to the point of becoming cryptic, and almost sutra-like.

Some other issues that require consideration, given the avowed objective of providing an alternative to mythologising history, is the slippage into designating the Harappan civilisation as Indus-Sarasvati (pp. 73-76). Further, a lay reader is likely to be confused if she reads that the Harappan civilisation spread over an area of 1 million sq kms (p. 91), and learns, just three pages later (p. 94) that it extended over 680, 000 sq kms. Other errors include dating the *Astangahrdaya Samhita* to the millennium instead of the 7th century CE (p. 157), and Rudradaman's famous Sanskrit inscription to 150 BCE instead of CE (p. 201). Also, it is sad to find Sanskrit and Prakrit being mentioned as 'Sanslait' and 'Pralait' (pp. 212-213).

Some additions would probably have made the volume more accessible to lay readers. A chronological chart would have been valuable, as also a list of abbreviations, and a short, annotated bibliography, arranged thematically.

One wishes that some more space had been provided for discussing traditions that were not textualised – in working stone, metal, textile production, leather working, a range of other crafts, architecture, sculpture, painting and more. Many of these traditions requiring a combination of scientific and aesthetic knowledge that is often awe-inspiring were contributed by non-literate Indians, who experimented, discovered, transmitted their knowledge through non-textual modes. While some of these receive passing mention in some of the contributions, there are only four illustrations of stone tools, megaliths and stone sculpture, all in the single article by Manjil Hazarika on the North East, in the entire volume. The sections on the 20th century could have included some discussion on new modes of communication, including radio, film, television, to name some obvious examples.

While welcoming the present endeavour, we also hope there will be more histories of Indians in future.

Kumkum Roy retired as professor of ancient history at Jawaharlal Nehru University.