

## India - A History

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The origins of Indian history being lost in misty myth. The Hindi language seductively provides one clue, linking the people of the subcontinent to its European cousins. This has given rise to the idea of the Aryan invasion, conquering and subjugating the indigenous population, (the most basic of a succession of such to come) imposing the rigid caste system, a tradition of which is believed to go back thousands of year. But is this all wishful thinking? Phantasies of a glorious past, as manifested by the ancient Sanskrit legends that have been handed down to us.

The problem is that there are ancient myths of Indian history, and also ancient archeological remains - the Hattapam culture, which spread itself and its uniformity (as manifested by the width of streets and the layouts of its buildings and city plannings). But there is absolutely no correlation between the two.

The book starts promising, but then it develops into a mere compendium of events, which presented linearly, makes for overwhelming overload, with no rhyme nor any reason. History, as a catalogue of dynastic events, listing the one ruthless ruler after the other, and the ensuing Brownian motion of success and failure in battle, becomes incredibly tedious. There is very little sense of the under current of Indian history. What was the life of people in general, and how much were they effected by the various schemes of their rulers? True, one learns that Hiduism may not be that old after all, that it supplanted Buddhism, a thousand years after its founding, with its atheistic monastic traditions exported to the East. One learns about the various invasions of India from the North West starting with the Hellenistic forays of Alexander the Great. Forays, which with the advent of Muhammed became more and more associated with Muslim power. There were Sultanic rule in the North of India throughout medieval times in Eurooe, and the last great Muslim empire was that of the Moghuls, introduced by Babur and his five successors, each of which gained power through fratricide (not always shying away from patricide as well) and all of them ruling for remarkably long periods. The Moghuls were of nomadic progeny, Babur claiming both Turkish and Mongol ancestry. Thus their rules were analogous to that of the Ottoman, and various nomadic dynasties of China. The last of the great, the J. actually managed to rule for fifty years, before succumbing to old age during a military campaign in the south at the beginning of the 18th century. But the Moghuls were not the whole of India, even if they dominated its larger part, and left its indelible mark, most noticeably appreciated through its splendid architecture. In the south there were minor dynasties as well. So why did the splendid Moghul empire disintegrate? Had its last great emperor simply overextended himself? The 18th century provided a power-vaccum, into which the British like to say that they simply stumbled.

The Arabs had traded with India for a millenium across the Arabian Sea, the Portuguese got footholds already in the beginning of the 16th century, Vasco di Gama, succeeding where Columbus had spectatcularly failed. In the 18th century the French and

the English established ports and concessions, and rights to factories, i.e. depots. Bombay (the name of which, easily decoded, was originally coined by the Portuguese), Calcutta and Madras, were no ancient cities (although previous settlements can always be traced), but grew out of commercial ventures. But how come those commercial ventures became regular military conquests, initially neither sanctioned nor initiated by the British Government, but carried out by a commercial firm - the East India company, acting of its own. Maybe military conquest is only trade but with other means. maybe the sweet allure of military superiority was irresistible. John Clive is a key player. And there were military rivalries with the French, and when the latter were out of the way (except for their vestigial foothold at Pondicherry) the British started their conquest in earnest.

One believes that the Western contacts with India in the 18th century were mutually respectful, only later during the 19th century did the colonial attitude of inherent superiority develop. There was indeed a power-vacuum, that is true, but such a theory does not justify subjugation, unless one sees the British conquest as just one of many that have been imposed upon a collection of supine populations. The so called mutiny of 1857 was a watershed. It did in the mind of the British, and many of its loyal western supporters, brandish the natives as cruel and inferior. It was bloodily suppressed, as all such things tend to be.

So how could a handful of British, most of them civil servants, subjugate a race of millions, so completely dwarfing their numbers? Divide and Conquer, a classical saying, is often referred to in this context. The Indians did not have a sense of identity, one faction was set against another. But it is not clear whether this was a result of a conscious and deliberate policy, or just a fact of state, of which the British reaped unintentional benefit.

The Saga of the East India company was gone, and in its stead, Disraeli had presented the British Queen with the jewel of India, of which she now could grandiosely term herself empress. So by now it was solely a British dominion, out of which it squeezed untold riches, in compensations for which the undeniable blessings of western civilization were imposed on the natives. The land was criss-crossed with a network of railways, only rivalled by that of Continental Europe. Educational institutes were established, and a functioning civil service were put in effect (although some historians point out that when it came to bureaucracy, the British had in fact little to teach, the traditions were already well in place before their advent.

But the hold on the land became eventually untenable. The very people the British had educated turned against her, demanding independence. The National Congress was established in the 1880's, and Nehru's father, Gandhi and Nehru himself became its key-players. Wars postponed the process, but so in 1947 it was accomplished, one of the major components of a process of de-colonialization that characterized the post-war world.

One can understand why distant history, of which so little is known, must be presented without any narrative aplomb; but such lack is inexcusable, when it comes to modern history, where the documentation is rich enough to allow an arresting, yet accurate, rendering. But the last part of the book is, I am sorry to admit, almost as dull as its initial chapters of transport, yet any first book on the history of a country or period is bound to be confusing, only subsequent readings will enable the reader to create his own context. Names or events that produce nothing but a blank at their first encounters, elicit a nod of recognition on

their second, and after a few repetitions, they become part of your heritage, and as such benefit from its fullness.

A historical compilation cannot be taken in completely, but one may at least ask whether it has explained some features. A natural question for any student of India is the origin of the animosity between its Muslim and Hindi population, which came to its head during the heady months that preceded the partition, and which is still very much festering in the fabric of its society. Does the book really shed any light? One suspects that the Hindi system of caste would be anathema to the Muslim religion, as it is to the Christian, and thus it supposedly being lacking among the Muslims, they for that very reason may not fit into India's supposedly rigidly hierarchical society, but remain, literally, outcasts. Such a naive view of matters is belied by two observations. The notion of caste, or at least that of social hierarchy, is not a stranger to Muslim society, just as it is not unheard of in Christian. Thus Muslims do carry on a similar parallel hierarchy, as that of the Indian concepts of various *jati*. Secondly, one may suspect that the majority of Hindi converts were those of lower castes, and thus the animosity may in some sense be explained, by the traditional animosity existing between the lower classes and those thinking of themselves as superior. Now the matter of a different religion, does naturally aggravate matters. Many historians do point out that although Muslim supremacy may have sparked opportunistic conversion, the Hindi population as such, with their beliefs and temples, did not suffer terribly under Muslim rules, Islam being by tradition a tolerant religion, (The reason for which, cynics are always eager to point out, being that only infidels were subject to tax, thus proselytism had to be restrained.)

As an introduction the book is overwhelming and thus confusing. It fails to grip the reader, as far as narrative suspense, or illuminating insights. But at least it gives a feeling for the complexity of the material, its wealth and intractability, preparing him or her for another, maybe more focused, study.

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