

ESSAY BOOK REVIEW

Early India

From the Origins to AD 1300

BY ROMILA THAPAR

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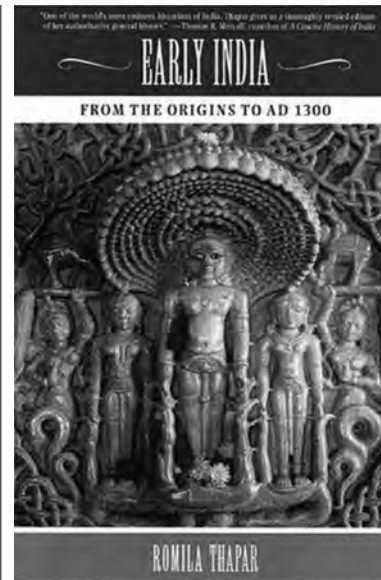
ILLUSTRATIONS, FIGURES, MAPS, CHRONOLOGY, GLOSSARY, BIBLIOGRAPHIES, AND INDEX

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The importance of Romila Thapar's achievement in *Early India: From the Origins to 1300 AD*, in relation to the work of her predecessors, lies in her access to new archaeological and literary sources, which she herself did not have when she wrote a shorter version forty years ago, as well as in her understanding of the nature of the enterprise of writing history. Spelled out in an introduction, this understanding is the essential background for following Thapar's approach. History, she insists, is about change—in ideas, in the importance of regions, in social structures, in religious rituals, in agriculture, in languages, in art and architecture. Dynastic changes have a place in such a history, but she relates them to social changes, making her study at once more difficult, more challenging, and more interesting. The India of her concern is the geographical region coterminous with what we now call South Asia.

Trends in Historical Writing on Early India

Among earlier attempts to write a history of ancient India using the variety of sources that were becoming available—archaeological, epigraphical, and literary—three general trends stand out, all influen-



tial in the understanding of Indian society. All are represented by scholars of great learning, who were dedicated to the modern historical method that had become part of the world of scholarship in India as elsewhere, and they are given judicious examination in a chapter Thapar calls “perceptions of the past.”

The first of these trends is often referred to as “imperialist.” It was largely the product of writers connected with British rule in India and was also basically concerned with the fate of empires in the Indian subcontinent. One of the

earliest and probably the most influential of such historians was Vincent Smith, whose *Early History of India* was first published in 1904, was republished as late as 1957, and was widely used as a text in both India and the West. For Smith, the key to understanding Indian history was the lack of political unity. Despite his insistence that the unity of India was the ideal of the Indian people throughout the centuries, the great empires that attempted political unification did not survive because of the inherent weakness of Indian society due to caste, religion, and regional differences. Without a strong supreme authority, he insisted, India always lapsed into chaotic disunity. The history of early India taught a lesson to modern Indians, for, in contrast to India in the past, British India in the nineteenth century was strong and united, and, he declared, what India had been in the past, “she would be again, if the hand of the benevolent power which now safeguards her boundaries should be withdrawn.”¹

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Indian historians not unnaturally reacted to this reading of Indian history—and a second, prolific, trend of nationalist history developed and history became, as Thapar points out, “a major component in the construction of national identity and culture” (19). Indian nationalism is based on perceptions of early India to an astonishing degree, for some prominent nationalist historians saw Indian identity rooted in various versions of Hindu religions. For this reason it is particularly important for Thapar that early India is not confined to the material and cultural artifacts associated with Hinduism. Her chapter on the politics of Northern India, circa AD 700–1200, is crucial to her interpretation of early Indian history, for this is the period referred to in many texts as “the Muslim invasion,” when, according to one distinguished nationalist historian, the Muslim rulers “very nearly extinguished the Hindu culture by destroying the sources which fed and nourished it.”² Such a point of view was very influential during the nationalist movement when India was struggling for independence. Interpretation of the Indian past and debate over “what really happened” are the warp and weft of contemporary Indian politics.

The third trend exhibits the influence of the Marxist analysis of society, which was especially important in defusing some of the tensions caused by writings that emphasized religion as the dominating force in India. Instead, trade, commerce, the ownership of land, and exploitation by the British rulers were given prominence.

Students and teachers will profit greatly from Thapar's fair and lucid treatment of some of the most contentious subjects in the study of early Indian civilization, such as the Indus civilization, the “Aryans,” the relation of the Vedic tradition to the later religious developments, caste, and the place of Buddhism. She places urbanism, trade, and the rise of the mercantile community at the forefront of her narrative, but does not scant the growth of the Mauryan Empire and the role of its great empire builder Ashoka, who was the subject of the book that established her scholarly reputation.³

An especially important feature of the book is the careful integration of Southern India into her main themes. She shows with great skill the importance of the interface between local and ancient cultures and the Sanskrit culture that became an all-India legacy. She shows how the long survival of the great kingdoms of the South gave the area a culture that, while sharing much with North India, differed in languages, the arts, and religious developments.

While Thapar emphasizes the necessity of linguistic skills, “the semiotics of symbols and the contextual dimensions of a text,” she also emphasizes the duty of the specialist scholar through books such as this to provide non-specialists with “some flavour of the richer taste emerging in historical research” (xxv). That obligation is fulfilled in *Early India*, for in addition to being tightly organized and written in clear and elegant English, it has useful line drawings of temples, maps for all the main periods, a lengthy glossary, and excellent bibliographies topically arranged.

That Romila Thapar has been an active participant in contemporary debates in India involving social reform and Hindu nationalism, particularly as they affected history textbooks in the schools, gives her interpretation of early Indian society special weight. Combined with her command of historical scholarship, these experiences make her a fascinating guide to an understanding of India, whether one's interest is in political history, social structure, or religious movements. ■

NOTES

1. Vincent A. Smith, *The Early History of India*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 372.
2. R. C. Majumdar, ed., *The Delhi Sultanate*, vol. 6 of *The History and Culture of the Indian People* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1960), xxxi.
3. Romila Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

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