

South Asia in the New Global History Textbooks

By Richard Davis

World History survey courses are on the increase throughout American colleges and universities. The reasons are diverse, including greater heterogeneity in the US college population, the ever-growing role of the United States in world affairs, and the worldwide economic and cultural trends (and academic fashion) we call “globalization.” Along with this growth, a new paradigm for presenting World History in such courses has emerged, one in which Asia plays an increasing role.

The newest and most popular textbooks for World History survey courses, such as Peter Stearns, et al., *World Civilizations: The Global Experience* (fourth edition, 2003) and Albert Craig, et al., *The Heritage of World Civilizations* (sixth edition, 2003), seek to adopt a more genuinely “global orientation.” This involves not only disavowing, or at least deemphasizing, the traditional Eurocentric historical narrative of previous World History texts, such as Robin Winks, et al., *A History of Civilization* (nine editions, 1955–95), which trace a single march of development from the early civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt, through Greece and Rome, into the Euro-American present. The new textbooks also attempt to develop a global vision of a more interconnected world. No longer will China, India, Japan, and perhaps a few other regional cultures be segregated in their own perfunctory chapters, as isolated and self-contained civilizations, usually somewhere in between the Roman Empire and the Reformation, as Joseph Strayer and Hans Gatzke did in *The Mainstream of Civilizations* (six editions, 1969–94).

Now the primary organizing structure is the period, defined across civilizations: the rise of agriculture and the earliest urban cultures, the revolutions in thought and religion, the expansion of city-states into imperial formations, and so on. The various developing civilizations are then distributed through each period. So the Indus Valley civilization and early Shang culture in China appear in juxtaposition with other early urban civilizations in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Confucius and Lao Tzu, the Buddha and Mahavira speak up along with the Israelite prophets and early Greek philosophers as formative thinkers and religious reformers.

There are many virtues to this new approach to teaching World History, both intellectual and pedagogical. It highlights matters that cross social and political borders, such as migration, trade, cultural as well as economic exchange, and disease. It even recognizes the role of nomadic societies as formative, rather than simply disruptive, in the processes of civilizational change. It should help students engage in more genuine cultural inquiry and comparison. The new textbooks incorporate numerous maps and at least some excerpts from original sources, so students gain some access to voices from other times and places. And Asianists should be delighted to see Chinese and Indians included with the usual Western suspects as almost equal participants in making the world in

which we live. The principal author of *The Heritage of World Civilizations* (hereafter *Heritage*) is a distinguished historian of Japan, Albert Craig. *Heritage* even chooses to feature a Chinese sculpture of the Buddha on the cover of one of its editions.

How does South Asia make out in the new globalized World History textbooks? While certainly an improvement over the absence of South Asia in Winks, or its segregation in Strayer and Gatzke, the answer, I’m afraid, is still not so well. Of the two most popular new texts, *World Civilizations* treats early South Asia extensively, but it is error-prone and relies on badly-dated scholarship. *Heritage* is more careful, but is also much too brief in its treatment of South Asia. If it is a matter of selecting a relatively effective textbook, I would choose *Heritage* over *World Civilizations*, and supplement its brevity with additional readings.

To me, the first sign of trouble in *World Civilizations* came when I noticed that A. L. Basham’s *Wonder That Was India* is cited as the first reference in the “Further Readings” listings for both “The Origins of Civilizations” and the “Classical Period” sections. Basham’s 1954 work was admirable in its own time, and it still has its uses, but a great deal of scholarship in the past fifty years has significantly altered the picture of early Indian culture that Basham presents. For example, Basham’s treatment of the Indus Valley civilization was based on the first few excavation reports that postulated an extremely conservative society, and on Mortimer Wheeler’s idea that a military invasion by Indo-Aryan warriors brought this civilization to an abrupt end. Since Basham’s time, hundreds of new excavations have greatly enhanced and complexified our understanding of the Indus Valley culture and of its demise. The authors of *World Civilizations* are not unaware of some of this recent archaeological research, but it does not appear to have obstructed their reliance on Basham. As for later periods of South Asian civilization, Basham’s choice of a topical, largely non-chronological treatment of classical Indian culture seems to have laid the groundwork for the many problems *World Civilizations* has with chronology.

Any South Asianist using this textbook will immediately notice simple errors of fact. My favorite has Sita and Draupadi as “two of the wives of the five Pandava brothers in the *Mahabharata*” (p. 132). Uncomfortable with Draupadi’s polyandry, the authors have imported a heroine from another epic poem to pair off with one of the brothers. Some errors are matters of anachronism. For instance, the text lists as examples of early Aryan deities of the Vedic period Lakshmi, Ganesha, and Shiva, and refers to the widespread worship of female deities. All this is true of Hinduism as it appears a millennium later, but not that found in the Vedas. Illustrations also seem to be out of synch with the historical sequence of the text. An icon of Shiva Nataraja from the eleventh century CE—and printed backwards in the fourth edition, raising his right leg rather than left—appears to illustrate the early brahmanical aniconic

sacrificial cult of the seventh and sixth centuries BCE. A photograph of the late medieval South Indian temple complex at Tiruvannamalai, misidentified as Madurai, is used to demonstrate the growth of Hindu devotionism in northern India during the Gupta period.

More troubling are some of the broader characterizations in the textbook. Again repeating Basham, the authors portray the early Indo-Aryans as a “rowdy crew” fond of beer, gambling, race horses, and war. Gamblers and horse-riders they were, but this quick sketch hardly gives sufficient credit to the peoples who produced the complex and sophisticated visionary poetry collected in the *Rg Veda*.

The authors of *World Civilizations* emphasize the rigidity of the caste system and develop the notion of “inequality as the social norm” not just in the main text, but also in a special “In Depth” inset. The In Depth treatment places the inequality of the traditional caste system as an ideal type, in juxtaposition with the modern Western ideal of equality, much as in the work of the anthropologist Louis Dumont. South Asianists will shake their heads at the reappearance of the old colonial stereotype of caste as “the most extreme expression of a type of social organization that violates the more revered principles on which modern Western societies are based” (p. 131). Nevertheless, this does have some pedagogical promise, as it could be used to lead American students to reflect on the historical contingency of their own preconceptions. The authors do admit that modern egalitarianism is often more a “social ideal” than a fact, and do point out that this is a “current belief” in the West, not a fact of human nature that other benighted civilizations have violated. However, they fail to acknowledge that the traditional Indian normative texts from which they draw their depiction of the social rigidity of caste also present a social ideal, a vision of an orderly hierarchical organic society. The authors do recognize that “rags to riches” social mobility may have existed in other traditional hierarchical societies like China and Greece, but they leave the false impression that the caste system obstructed all such movement in classical India. Using Indian caste as a comparative Other to highlight a contrast with the modern West leads the authors to present an inaccurate and reified notion of caste ideology as a historical reality.

Both textbooks emphasize the Ganges-River-based empires of the Mauryans (third to second centuries BCE) and the Guptas (third to fifth centuries CE) as political highpoints of early South Asian civilizations. The period in between is characterized as a period of “foreign invasions,” as if the boundaries of modern nation-states were already in place. In this they are just following a long-established narrative, which Basham reiterated. Yet culturally this was a crucial period in South Asia. The spread of Indo-Aryan cultural forms throughout the subcontinent, foundational works in Sanskrit literature, the formation of theistic Hinduism and of Mahayana Buddhism, the expansion of Buddhism as an international religious movement, and key works in every field of learning and South Asian cultural production date to this apparent interregnum. *Heritage* briefly acknowledges this cultural productivity, while *World Civilizations* skips immediately from Mauryan decline to the Gupta period and its “Hindu renaissance.”

One cannot fault the global textbook authors too much for simply following South Asian historical conventions. However, they miss an opportunity here. Not all South Asian empires were cen-

tered on the Gangetic heartland, or fit neatly into the borders of modern India. The most significant political formation of the period between the Mauryans and Guptas, the Kushana empire, was founded by a nomadic group that migrated from northwest China into central Asia, and first established a kingdom in northern Afghanistan. They moved eastward, set up a new capital in northern Pakistan, and continued to expand until they ruled over an empire that included not only most of northern India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, but also parts of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and western China. They maintained close commercial contacts with Rome and diplomatic relations with China. They looked to both Greece and India for their cultural models, and they played an instrumental role in extending Buddhism throughout Western, Central, and Eastern Asia. Here is a cosmopolitan dynasty that illustrates many of the features of ancient globalism. One can hope that the new global history paradigm will encourage more attention to those polities of the past that have been overlooked because they do not fall within the parameters of modern nations, and have therefore not attracted the attention of nationalist historians.

The authors of the new global history textbooks set themselves laudable, and difficult, goals. As the *World Civilization* authors state in their prologue, they wish to produce “real world history texts” that will not unduly foreground Western civilization. Rather than segmented separate civilizations, they hope to highlight ways that different societies have interacted with one another and to foster a more comparative and global perspective in students. And they hope to integrate the recent “explosion of knowledge about societies other than the West” into their overarching history. Asianists should applaud these aims, and at the same time insist that the textbooks do accurately reflect recent scholarship in their fields. Relying on a fifty-year-old cultural history will not suffice.

We cannot blame the failure in the presentation of South Asian history in *World Civilizations* and *Heritage of World Civilizations* on the authors of these innovative textbooks alone, though. Over the past three decades, we specialists in South Asian studies have been adept in critiquing the Orientalist and colonialist underpinnings of past Indological scholarship, upon which Basham inevitably based his own cultural history of India. We have produced significant revisionist works in almost every area of scholarship on early South Asia that these textbooks cover. However, we have not translated this “explosion of knowledge” into survey textbook form, by and large. As far as I am aware, no South Asianist has been involved as author in any recent World History textbook. We have failed to produce new comprehensive synthetic accounts of South Asian history, culture, and religion that would integrate this new scholarship into a new overarching narrative and supplant works like Basham’s long-lived *Wonder*. ■

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