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Niharranjan Ray et.al. *A Sourcebook of Indian Civilization*

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Niharranjan Ray et.al. *A Sourcebook of Indian Civilization*. Orient Longman, 2000.

In some ways, the back story of this volume is as interesting as the content of the book. It was initially conceived as part of a project designed by the ministry of education to cover historical sources for the ancient, medieval, and modern periods of Indian history. The first volume was completed in 1975, but it languished inexplicably with the publisher for a quarter of a century (perhaps because the original editor passed away during the interval). Revised and updated, it was published in 2000 with changes incorporated in an appendix.

The format of the book addresses one of the key issues of Indian historiography—periodization. Until the last four decades, Indian history was influenced by the European model with a tripartite division into Ancient, Medieval, and Modern periods. This is an awkward fit for the subcontinent. As a result, there has been a reconfiguration of chronology which this volume recognizes. Accordingly, this volume covers “early” Indian history, and extends from pre-history to 1300 A.D. or C.E. (the common era in the new parlance). The period between 700 A.D./C.E. and 1300 A.D./C.E. is defined as early medieval in order to fit in with the overall plan of the book.

The organization is as follows: pre-history with emphasis on Neolithic sites, then the Harappan period (as the former Indus Civilization is called since it extended well beyond the Indus and is now called after its largest settlement) dated from 2700 to 1500 B.C. or B.C.E (before the Common Era); and a transitional and Vedic era (1500 to 600 B.C. or B.C.E.) which follows the arrival of the Aryan/Indo-European speakers in Northwest India and the development of traditional epics or Vedas in oral tradition put into written form in later periods, the later development of the philosophical treatises of the Upanishads, and the development of other building blocks of the emergent Hindu civilization such as the sacred language of Sanskrit, the spoken language of Prakrit, the Brahman priestly caste, and the caste system itself.

The next 1300 years are subdivided into two periods. The early historical period covers 600-400 B.C./B.C.E. and deals with the spread of iron, the spread of Aryan speakers and Hindu culture through the Ganges plain, the rise of city-states, territorial states, and centralized states and challenges to the prevailing Brahmanism through the origins of Buddhism and Jainism. The later part of the early historical period goes from 400 to 700 A.D./C.E. and covers the spread of Aryan/Hindu

culture to the south (peninsular India south of the Vindhya Mountains) and the emergence of historical states in the south, the struggle between orthodox Hinduism (Brahmanism) and the heterodox Buddhism and Jainism resulting in the triumph of the former and the emergence of classical Hindu culture in the latter section of this period (300-600 A.D./C.E.). This section also covers the emergence of the first centralized empires (Mauryan/Gupta). The "early" Medieval period stretches from 700 to 1300 A.D./C.E. It deals with the arrival of Islam and the evolution of regional identities with distinct economic, social, and political characteristics that have endured to the present.

The above chronological developments are traced in six chapters. After a relatively brief introductory narrative, the volume covers the geographical environment, agricultural and food production, religious observance, administrative structures, urban evolution, and regional societal and cultural change. Each of the chapters cites appropriate archaeological and literary sources. In fact, it is an encyclopedic compendium of archaeological and literary sources.

The former includes not only the examinations of artifacts and technological remnants, but also an examination of bones and fossils (paleontology), organic structures (carbon-dating), decorative styles and inscriptions (artistic motif interpretation), coinage (numismatics), and even blood types (serology). The latter includes reports of travelers, merchants, missionaries, emissaries, and visitors. It includes translations from secular administrative reports and other written commentaries, literary works especially after 200 A.D./C.E. as well as translations from sacred texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Bhagavad Gita, and various other religious texts chiefly from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The only limitation is that literary sources that have English translations are used. Therefore, Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, and Prakrit sources which do not have English translations are omitted.

The book makes two vital points. First, although it covers the achievements of the great Mauryan and Gupta empires, chronicled via archaeological and literary sources, it covers other periods in order to make the point that economic and cultural development took place even during periods of political "chaos." Secondly, it covers regional developments south of the Indo-Gangetic plain after 200 A.D./C.E. Indeed, in terms of archaeological and literary sources overall, it endeavors to cover the whole subcontinent.

Even a work that is as admirable as this is overall has its own limitations. The most pervasive is linguistics. In no section is there a linguistic analysis that might shed light on language evolution. This is a crucial omission as a comparative analysis (glottochronology) would shed some light on the movements and migrations of peoples. Linguistic analysis might illumine the spread of Aryan influence and its gradual syncretic fusion with other elements to form Hindu culture and society.

The arrangement of the book in terms of sources before 1300 also tends to minimize Muslim and Arabic/Persian sources and the Muslim role in the period of 700-1300 A.D./C.E compared to Hindu developments. This is regrettable as Muslims compose over one-quarter of the population of the subcontinent and have a higher birthrate than the population in general. Perhaps the latter two volumes would have given more coverage to this crucial sector in Indian civilization.

Overall, the dependence on English translations and the lack of linguistic analysis has led to three major omissions in coverage in this otherwise excellent sourcebook. The three chief controversies in the historiography of "early" India are the nature of the Harappan civilization, the mode of arrival of the Aryans/Indo-Europeans and the origins of the Gujuras and Rajputs.

The exact ethnic composition of the Harappan civilization is not even discussed. Although the book makes clear that this civilization spread far beyond the Indus into Sind, Gujurat, parts of the current Afghanistan and parts of Maharashtra, and other contiguous territory, it does not speculate on the identity of the Harappans. Were they related to the Dravidians of South Central and Southern India? Were they a combination of Dravidian, Munda, and other Austral-Asian groups? Was there already an Indo-European or Central Asian admixture? The absence of a linguistic analysis component and an exclusive reliance on archaeology leaves the volume moot on this topic.

The nature of the arrival of the Aryans/Indo-Europeans is part of an "indigenous groups versus immigrants" controversy that is a constant in Indian historiography. Did the Harappan culture decline due to climatic change which led to depopulation and decline before the arrival of the Aryan pastoralists from Central Asia directly or via Iran? Was it due in part to invasions from this language group? Were Aryan movements in the form of large-scale migrations or gradual small-scale migrations or a combination of both?

Did it take place between 1500-1200 and involve a fusion which was basically peaceful or were the incursions both peaceful and hostile? Certainly the reference to dasu or dark people in the earlier Vedas particularly the Rig Veda indicates a degree of hostility. Was this because of past fighting only or just contempt shown in an emergent caste system? There is certainly a parallel with the decline of Mycenae and the arrival of the Dorians during a similar period. Again the sourcebook does not speculate!

A similar silence greets the question of the arrival of the Gujuras and Rajputs between 500 and 800 A.D./C.E. Were they offshoots of the Hunnic invasions or other Central Asian incursions via the Hindu Kush who eventually settled in what is now Gujarat and Rajasthan? Alternately, were they indigenous clans who outgrew their desert conditions and sought new areas to conquer as population increased? The spread of Arabs and Vikings, whose environments did not support their population, during this same period would indicate an immigration. However, there does not seem to be any linkage through a study of extant customs. Again, a linguistic analysis of local dialects would be helpful. It would help answer questions such as are the Gujura Rajputs or are the Rajputs offshoots of the Gujura?

Notwithstanding the above caveats, this sourcebook is a useful source for professional practitioners of history. It is a good starting point for those who desire to do research on topics related to "early Indian civilization."

—— Norman C. Rothman