



4-1-2014

Charles Trautmann, *India: Brief History of A Civilization*

John Grayzel

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>

Recommended Citation

Grayzel, John (2014) "Charles Trautmann, *India: Brief History of A Civilization*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 70 : No. 70 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol70/iss70/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Comparative Civilizations Review* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

**Charles Trautmann, India: Brief History of A Civilization
Oxford University Press, 2011**

Reviewed by John Grayzel

Charles Trautmann's *India: Brief History of A Civilization*, is a relatively short (223 modest-sized pages) book that succinctly presents a chronological account of Indian history from the first appearance of urban civilization in the Indus Valley through the creation of the modern nation of India. It is written with clarity and a clear logical flow of events. Trautmann's background as both a historian and anthropologist is reflected in his smooth weaving of historical occurrence with accompanying commentary on the social and religious beliefs and practices of the different times, places and groups. There is a small number of accompanying black and white illustrations of maps, items and persons that give a minimalistic visual awareness of the subject matter under discussion. Though few in number, they are important, as the book is particularly suited as a text for those knowing little or nothing about Indian history.

All in all, it is an appealing introductory text and could deservedly find a significant place as not only an introduction to, but also a reference for, a larger course. Since Trautmann says he specifically wrote the book for his students in an introductory course this is not surprising and he has largely succeeded in what he set out to do. There is nothing startling, no grand theory, and no controversial claims, only a clear presentation of distilled and well-connected information.

There are, however, two significant gaps in the work. The first is the absence of significant discussion of Dravidian culture *per se* and its ongoing impact on the larger Indian "Hindu" civilization. This is surprising since Trautmann has written on the Dravidians, so it must be presumed he is well informed as to the past and present importance of the presently over 225 million Dravidian speakers stretching from the South of India into Pakistan and across to Sri Lanka and to the West into the present State of Maharashtra. That he so neglects them and starts with the Indus Valley mainly as a background to the invading Aryans, Turks, Mughals, Hun, and Europeans, follows the pattern of classic Indian studies that has long personified the adage that it is the victors who write history.

In fact, Trautmann's account brought to my mind a long forgotten book by the well-known Indian writer Nirad Chaudhuri, *The Continent of Circe*. In that work Chaudhuri, in a rather severe fashion reminiscent of V.S. Naipaul's *India: a Wounded Civilization*, basically looks upon India as a wastebasket filled by successive European invaders who, like Ulysses' sailors lured by the call of the sorceress Circe onto her island only to be subsequently transformed into pigs, were attracted by the Indian sub-continent only to be turned into degenerates by the realities of its environment. Chaudhuri, who can't find enough nasty to say about almost everyone, is far more entertaining but far less

consistent and credible than Trautmann, and one would be warned not to take too seriously everything he says. His work is anything but an appropriate introduction to India, yet it has one thing Trautmann lacks – a true flavor of India. And it is here that one must question the appropriateness of Trautmann’s title: *A Short History of Indian Civilization*.

Trautmann gives two definitions of civilization, one a “quality” of a group, the other “a way of life.” What Trautmann’s book provides is a chronology of events accompanied by selective insights into the concurrent “ways of life.” What he almost entirely neglects is the qualitative aspect that really gives each civilization its uniqueness.

To cite just one example: Trautmann briefly describes the Hindu Kingdom of Vijayanagara. Vijayanagara existed for several centuries in South Central India and was an important military power and a center of trade between the Portuguese and Tamil India to the east. However, every empire and every civilization has trade, rulers, war, religion and an economy. Neither these elements nor how they unfold are its civilization. Its civilization is as much a matter of “flavor” as “facts”. Thus Vijayanagara’s capital is today known as Hampi and is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Its preservation is unique, as the Kingdom was betrayed and the capital deserted in a day, and its ruins remain frozen in time. If you look down upon them from the surrounding mountains you see magnificently planned expanses with buildings made of the surrounding stones in an array of structures that seem to emerge from their immediate geomorphic surrounding. If you descend into the remains you can sense the dynamic that must have been “Vijayanagara” life as you view the stretch of structures, markets, palaces, temples, strung as beads on parallel pulsating cords.

In fact, if you go to the main temple and hit one of its mighty columns it produces a clear vibrating note. Then you discover each column produces a note different from the others. Suddenly you realize that the entire structure is actually a musical instrument. You suddenly realize the building is actually a polyphone. You wonder what type of civilization would produce so extraordinary an instrument? The answer that springs to mind is: “only Indian civilization.”

So it is with Indian civilization past and present. It is a civilization of the senses: sights, sounds and colors. Colors, like the spectrum of people that run through streets during Holi all tinted fluorescently from dyes that have been thrown at each other; or like the weave of its saris, the music of its sitars, the hours of speculation of its philosophers, the pungent aromas and spices of its food. These, far more than its history, are what makes something Indian, rather than French or Chinese or Polynesian, and these are what Trautmann unfortunately neglects.

One cannot understand Indian civilization solely as a monochrome. You understand more of the deep essence of Indian civilizations watching the finger motions of Balinese dancers or the story of the Ramayana as portrayed by Javanese shadow puppets than by looking at a map with names of political entities on the Indian sub-continent or pictures of assorted historic figures.

Exactly why Trautmann so ignores the aesthetic of India is a mystery. One might surmise it was from a desire to keep his work short but this isn't the case. In fact, I was originally attracted to the book to see how anyone could write a history of Indian Civilization in so few pages. Yet Trautmann finds pages of space to write extensively of Islamic history, not only in India, but also in Arabia. Thus, he finds space to give a miniature exposé on the chronology and trajectory of the Middle East from the time of Mohammed through the Abbasid dynasty. All interesting details, but all largely irrelevant to Indian civilization.

In the end what Trautmann has written is a fine short introduction to North and Central Indian History from the Indus valley civilization to the present. It is an admirable work for that purpose. At the same time, it is not an introduction to Indian civilization as a civilization nor to all that has been the wonder of that civilization, from before the Aryans to the present, let alone the possible emerging future. Trautmann presents the outline of the rainbow of India but the work itself is a little too monochromatic to deliver on everything the title promises.