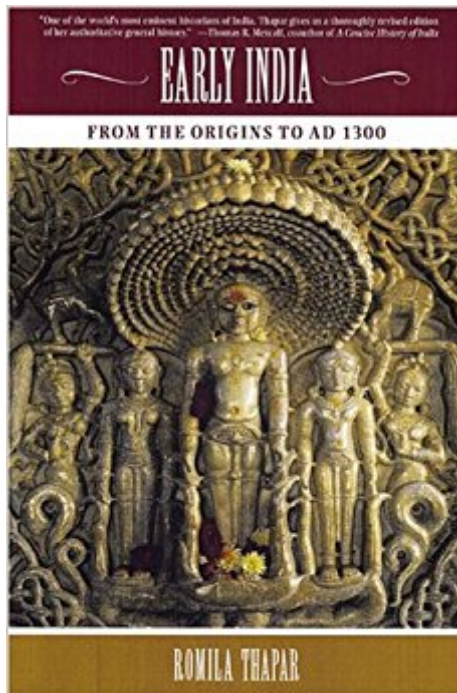


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Early India: From The Origins To AD 1300



Synopsis

Early India represents a complete rewriting by Romila Thapar of her classic work, *A History of India* (the first volume in the Penguin History of India series), thirty-five years after it was first published. Thapar has incorporated the vast changes in scholarly understanding and interpretation of Indian history that have occurred during her lifetime to revise the book for a new generation of readers. This new work brings to life thousands of years of history, tracing India's evolution before contact with modern Europe was established: its prehistoric beginnings; the great cities of the Indus civilization; the emergence of mighty dynasties such as the Mauryas, Guptas, and Cholas; the teachings of the Buddha; the creation of heroic epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana; and the creation of regional cultures. Thapar introduces figures from the remarkable visionary ruler Ashoka to other less exemplary figures. In exploring subjects as diverse as marriage, class, art, erotica, and astronomy, Thapar provides an incomparably vivid and nuanced picture of India. Above all, she shows the rich mosaic of diverse kingdoms, landscapes, languages, and beliefs.

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Customer Reviews

Having recently finished reading Ms. Thapar's work on Indian History up to AD 1300 (Penguin), I must conclude that it is a very impressive volume. A great deal of research and study must have gone into the creation of such a remarkable opus. I thought it was all-in-all, very respectful of its subject, and especially effective in peeling away centuries of pre- and mis-conceptions imposed by colonial/western commentators. I did not consider the book, in any way, anti-India or anti-Hindu. Anyway, a few points I will make are as follows: 1. Ms. Thapar introduces many remarkable and

unusual ideas at the very start of her book (in my opinion, the best part), such as race being a colonial construction. But, she fails to discuss these adequately, and very often allows her thoughts to pass on to oblivion, rather than to a definite conclusion. Maybe, a "definite conclusion" does not exist, at this point-of-time, but a more in-depth approach would have been preferred (even if it added pages to the book).² Secondly, the quotes used on the back cover seem to imply, that this book should be primarily taken as rebuttal to farfetched claims made about Indian history, within India today. I don't think this is how this book should be advertised. It is so much more than just that.³ The material presented deals primarily with the social, and even economic, history of India. There is a great deal to be found on art, literature, science and architecture. But, my impression was off cultural, social and religious history, rather than political history. I understand that kings do not constitute the alpha and omega of history, but Ms. Thapar barely even mentions kings of influence, such as Kanishka, or even travelers and chroniclers, such as Fa-Hein, in any detail.⁴

Here is something I've learned about Indian history: It is pretty controversial to write anything about Indian History. There is very little you can actually say or write about Indian history without angering someone who cares very passionately about the subject you are speaking or writing about.

Undoubtably, the single biggest factor in aggravating the debate on Indian historical subjects is the "Hindu Nationalism Movement." People in the US who are even aware of this phenomenon typically describe it in political terms, for example, when writing about the actions of the BJP or "Bharatiya Janata Party" but it should surprise no one that Hindu Nationalist ideas extend directly into historical research, writing and debate. Hindu Nationalism inspired ideas take many forms in the discussion of Early Indian History. First, there is the debate, now largely won, by the way, over whether the initial Vedic migration into India was an "invasion" or not. Obviously, Hindu Nationalists would rather have it be said that there was no invasion, and many would further argue that India is the home of ALL Indo European Languages. Well, the good news: No Aryan invasion, more like small scale migration over many years. The bad news: There is no way that the Indo European language family originated in North West India, so call that one a draw. Even finding a "neutral" source on this subject is difficult, but Romila Thapar does a good job of presenting the current historical facts in a non-inflammatory fashion. Another major area of dispute colored by Hindu Nationalism are the pre-Mughal Turkish led raids into Western India, which allegedly resulted in temple destruction and the building of a mosque over said temple location.

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