

Starting Points

Twenty centuries of ancient baggage
heaped together, slung across
our backs,
we began our long journey.

—R. Murugaiyan (d. 2009), Sri Lankan Tamil poet¹

Indian stories are continually retold, and I follow that grand tradition by narrating afresh nearly 5,000 years of human experiences on and near the subcontinent. This history matters. In modern times, a quarter of humanity lives in South Asia. For the rest of us, our lives are shaped by South Asian cultures—from the films we watch, to the spices that flavor our foods, to the clothes we wear, to how we exercise, to (for many) the religions we practice. In brief, South Asia and its myriad traditions are critical to the human experience, and so we all ought to know a bit—maybe more than a bit—about the region’s history. This book offers an overview of South Asian history with a focus on the Indian subcontinent, aimed at avid and casual readers alike, including those taking their first dive into this fascinating subject. For the non-initiated, maybe you are already confused, wondering what, exactly, constitutes “South Asia” and “India.” I explain that and more in this brief chapter as I introduce Indian and South Asian history as an under-told set of stories brimming with an astonishing diversity of people and experiences.

This book narrates the wondrously dense and complex history of life on the Indian subcontinent (i.e., largely what is now Pakistan, India, and

Bangladesh), with periodic appearances from Sri Lanka and other surrounding areas (i.e., modern-day Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives Islands). Collectively, we call the region inhabited by these eight modern nations “South Asia.” I also use “India” throughout this book, referring predominantly to the subcontinent, not the more modest contemporary nation-state (a historian’s privilege, as elaborated below). Still, this book is not a history of land, of either South Asia or India, but rather of the many communities who have made these places home over millennia. My focus on people—on South Asians—stands at the core of this book, and I strive to tell the stories of many different South Asian groups, from rich to poor, from high class to low class, from the builders of the Indus Civilization about 4,600 years ago (chapter 1) to everyday people in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and other countries in the twenty-first century (chapter 24). Primary sources anchor every chapter—including box quotes drawn from many Indian sources and languages—so that, to the extent possible, you can hear for yourself the voices of prior generations of South Asians.

South Asian history is lengthy and diverse, but that diversity itself provides a kind of glue that holds together a wide-ranging set of narratives. Across time and regions, South Asians engaged in robust cross-cultural exchanges between groups on the subcontinent and with migrants. They forged connections via trade and travel with people living in other parts of Asia and, in more recent centuries, the rest of the world. Partly owing to their ever-changing contexts and contacts, South Asians repeatedly innovated in the religious and political spheres, making adaptation and change recurrent, even consistent, parts of their lived experiences. Throughout this book, I return to these persistent threads of diversity, cross-cultural exchanges, and innovation, since they offer anchors to ground us within South Asia’s mosaic of history.

India and South Asia

This book is a history of India—in its historical sense of the subcontinent (i.e., the area covered by modern-day Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh)—with some journeys into other areas of South Asia (especially Afghanistan and Sri Lanka), and I use both terms aware of their virtues and drawbacks. “South Asia” is a modern, social science

term, imposed from outside the region, and defined geographically as the land area bounded on the north by the Hindu Kush, Himalayan, and Karakoram mountains and on the south by the Indian Ocean. “South Asia” is useful for shaking scholars out of nationalist boundaries, themselves rather new.² But the phrase lacks history and is commonly confused with Southeast Asia.³ “India” is a far older term and has been used for millennia to refer to the subcontinent. There are two additional reasons, beyond its historical weight, that I use “India” throughout this book. It is a widely understood term, far more so than “South Asia.” Also, I do not cover all of South Asia equally, devoting more time to the subcontinent than, say, Sri Lanka, and using “India” honestly reflects that choice.

Despite these reasons, using “India” to refer to the entire subcontinent will jar readers who are accustomed to India denoting only the post-1947 nation-state. For them, I hope the different sense of “India”—as a broader, not politically demarcated, geography—proves a useful disruption. It can remind us that, in this book, we peruse the halls of history where societies and states were quite different than they are today. In this sense, my insistence on using “India” is also a corrective against gross presentism. The Indian nation-state is quite new in human history, and its recent advent does not require us to abandon the deeper, more historically grounded sense of “India” as the broader subcontinent.

Many Indian Histories

The celebrated scholar A. K. Ramanujan once asked, “Is there an Indian way of thinking?” He answered yes, there are many Indian ways of thinking, depending on the inquirer’s tone and intentions.⁴ Similarly, answers abound to the deceptively simple question—What is Indian (or South Asian) history? It depends on what you want to know, whom you consider to be important, and which historical changes you deem essential to understand. This book includes a little of everything, including cultural, religious, social, literary, economic, and intellectual histories. I trace larger trends, such as India’s first urbanization (third millennium BCE), second urbanization (first millennium BCE), the advent of temple-based Hindu practices (first millennium CE), and the spread of

Indo-Persian culture (second millennium CE). I also take significant forays into biographical history, detailing the lives of individuals from Ashoka (third century BCE) to Pandita Ramabai (nineteenth century CE). Readers will find a fair amount of political history in these pages, although I have at times chosen to accommodate a broader array of stories rather than narrowly focusing on state affairs (I elaborate on this choice in the Historiography essay). Overall, I aim to make significant strides forward in terms of breadth and inclusion in how we narrate South Asian history, according to a few distinct choices.

This book presents a greater diversity of voices than we often hear in South Asian history in terms of gender, caste, class, region, language, and religion. In concrete terms, that means that readers will encounter more women, Dalits, lower castes, poor and disadvantaged communities, south Indians, non-Indian South Asians, non-Sanskrit speakers, and non-Hindus. Diversity helps us better understand Indian history, both its underappreciated aspects and, also, its dominant groups. To again become concrete, I detail the oppression of Dalits and lower castes, in theory and practice, in the first millennium CE (chapters 7 and 8). This helps readers gain important knowledge about life for a sizeable chunk of the ancient Indian population who are often neglected in traditional historical accounts. It also grants a richer, contextual perspective on more well-researched elite topics, such as Brahminical Sanskrit literature by the law theorist Manu and the famed poet Kalidasa.

Parts of the Indian subcontinent developed according to distinct rhythms, as did discrete communities. India was often more a cluster of regions than a unified whole and its people, as a geneticist has observed, “a large number of small populations.”⁵ Even when we can hazard larger categories, such as north and south India, they often diverged for centuries, even millennia, in their historical development. To address this reality, I do a certain amount of tacking back and forth, and I devote some chapters to covering discrete regions (especially chapters 12, 14, and 16). Throughout, I strive to incorporate south Indian history especially, as a corrective to our standard narrative of Indian history being unapologetically north Indian-centric. For instance, I highlight material evidence of early social practices in Karnataka (chapter 3), detail Chola rule and culture (chapter 9), cover Nayaka and Maratha ruling lineages (chapter 15), and incorporate colonial-era activities from Madras

(chapter 19). I also bring in Sri Lanka (known at earlier points in history as Taprobane or Ceylon). I freely admit that I fall short of adequate geographic diversity in these pages, and some regions still receive less airtime than others (e.g., Assam). Still, I hope to have taken a sizable step toward correcting enduring geographic biases in the discipline of South Asian history.

I do not entirely confine myself to the region of South Asia in these pages, and this calls for explanation. As the sociologist Janet Abu-Lughod noted, India was “on the way to everywhere.”⁶ As a result, South Asian history sometimes spills into other world areas, through migration, trade, travel, pilgrimage, and other human movements. I look beyond the confines of South Asia at numerous points, including to explain ancient migrations (chapters 1 and 2), the diffusion of Sanskrit-based knowledge and stories (chapter 8), Chola conquests in Southeast Asia (chapter 9), Indian participation in the Persian literary sphere (chapter 10), the Bahmani kingdom’s connections with Iran (chapter 11), and European colonialism (chapters 12 and 16–22). I use maps as a visual aid to highlight specific points and moments of connection. Still, I have sought to keep the focus on the relevance of these transregional links for those living in South Asia.

I mention select migrations out of the subcontinent, although I am not thorough on this point. There is much to say about the impact of South Asians on other world areas, but that is a different history than I recount here. Accordingly, I mention major outward movements of groups, such as indentured laborers in the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries CE (chapter 20), late twentieth to early twenty-first-century migrant workers (chapter 24), and the contemporary diaspora (afterword). But, with a few brief exceptions, I stop short of following these groups to their new homes, at which point they become part of histories set in those regions.

Premodernity forms the core of South Asian history. So often, we forget this truism, because it is easiest to focus on events close to our own time. I am not immune from the pull of the present, and I cover shorter time periods in each chapter as the book moves forward through the centuries. Still, most of this book centers on premodern South Asia (pre-1750 CE), as it should since that is the bulk of known human history in the region. This emphasis should help readers better contextualize

contemporary trends, such as Hindu-Muslim conflict that largely dates in its current form to the nineteenth century and was preceded by centuries in which religious identities were more fluid (chapters 10–16). Focusing on the deeper past might also help us provincialize ourselves and our own moment in time.⁷ After all, we are not the endpoint of history, and soon enough we too will be part of a far longer past.

Indian History before Us

There is a certain amount of unavoidable disconnect in Indian history, which is a collection of chronological stories that overlap but do not fully cohere. In this sense, an overview history of South Asia is a little like the *Panchatantra*, a famous collection of animal fables from India that became a premodern bestseller across Asia and Europe (chapter 8). In the *Panchatantra*, Karataka tells story after story to exemplify ethics to Damanaka, who sometimes takes the moral to heart and other times ignores the lesson. The *Panchatantra* contains dozens of discrete tales, connected by the thin thread of this meta conversation between two friends. Indian and South Asian history, too, is a series of discrete stories that do not feed into a grand, singular narrative. And so I make no attempt to offer an overarching storyline here, opting instead for the more modest and intellectually honest approach of repeated themes.

Amid this book's complex, slightly unwieldy narrative of subcontinental history—with its multipronged focus, diverse voices, and ambitious geographical and temporal breadth—I use a set of recurrent themes to give readers a navigable path beyond chronology. As mentioned above, diversity has long been a shared feature across Indian communities and so may serve as a connecting thread in history too. Additionally, migration is a repeated phenomenon as waves of people came to the subcontinent over the millennia. New groups brought their own ideas and interacted with indigenous and earlier migrant populations, resulting in a kaleidoscope of syncretic South Asian traditions. Another strand worth mentioning at the outset is that South Asians evinced an ongoing interest in history, telling stories about times past, which I include as part of Indian intellectual, social,

and religious trends. Also, the mundane persists, such as what people wore and ate, how they worked, and their family and community ties. Such things are part of all human experiences, and they are often knowable even without written records, which makes them especially helpful as connecting topics across close to 5,000 years of history. Last, more difficult subjects recur in numerous time periods as well, such as social stratification and climate change.

We face limits in accessing the past imposed by archival sources, which I strive to overcome where possible. Archives are “rags of realities,” as a French scholar has put it, always incomplete and insufficient.⁸ A compounding issue is that, to quote an Africanist, “the documents we read were not written for us.”⁹ As a result, historical documents—primary sources such as political texts, travelogues, edicts, and inscriptions—often do not convey the kinds of information that we seek, especially about historically oppressed communities. More prosaically, South Asia’s hot, wet climate is anathema to paper preservation, and multiple South Asian nations do not provide easy archival access.¹⁰ Still, difficulty ought not to be mistaken for impossibility, and I decline to continue the uninspiring pattern of using only the most accessible sources in the most straightforward ways. Instead, I strive to listen to the “whisperings” of history—to read against the grain of well-used sources and seek out hitherto neglected ones—to reconstruct more vibrant, accurate South Asian historical narratives.¹¹

Sometimes archival challenges are compounded by modern biases, and two prejudices recur with numbing frequency in modern South Asian histories: sexism and casteism. Many historians write out women entirely, filling chapters upon chapters with only men. Most mention the caste-oppressed but too often only through an upper-caste lens that dehumanizes and disempowers. In contrast, the experiences and writings of nuns are central to my narrative of early Buddhism (chapter 3), and, millennia later, I include female voices amid India’s nineteenth-century reformers (chapters 19 and 20). Oppressed castes do not speak to us directly in ancient Indian texts, but I found works about them that rendered insights when read through a lens that inverts the works’ Brahminical gaze (chapter 7). For modernity, I elaborate lower-caste, Dalit, and Adivasi movements at some length, underscoring their internal diversity and attempts to improve South Asian lives (chapters 20–24).

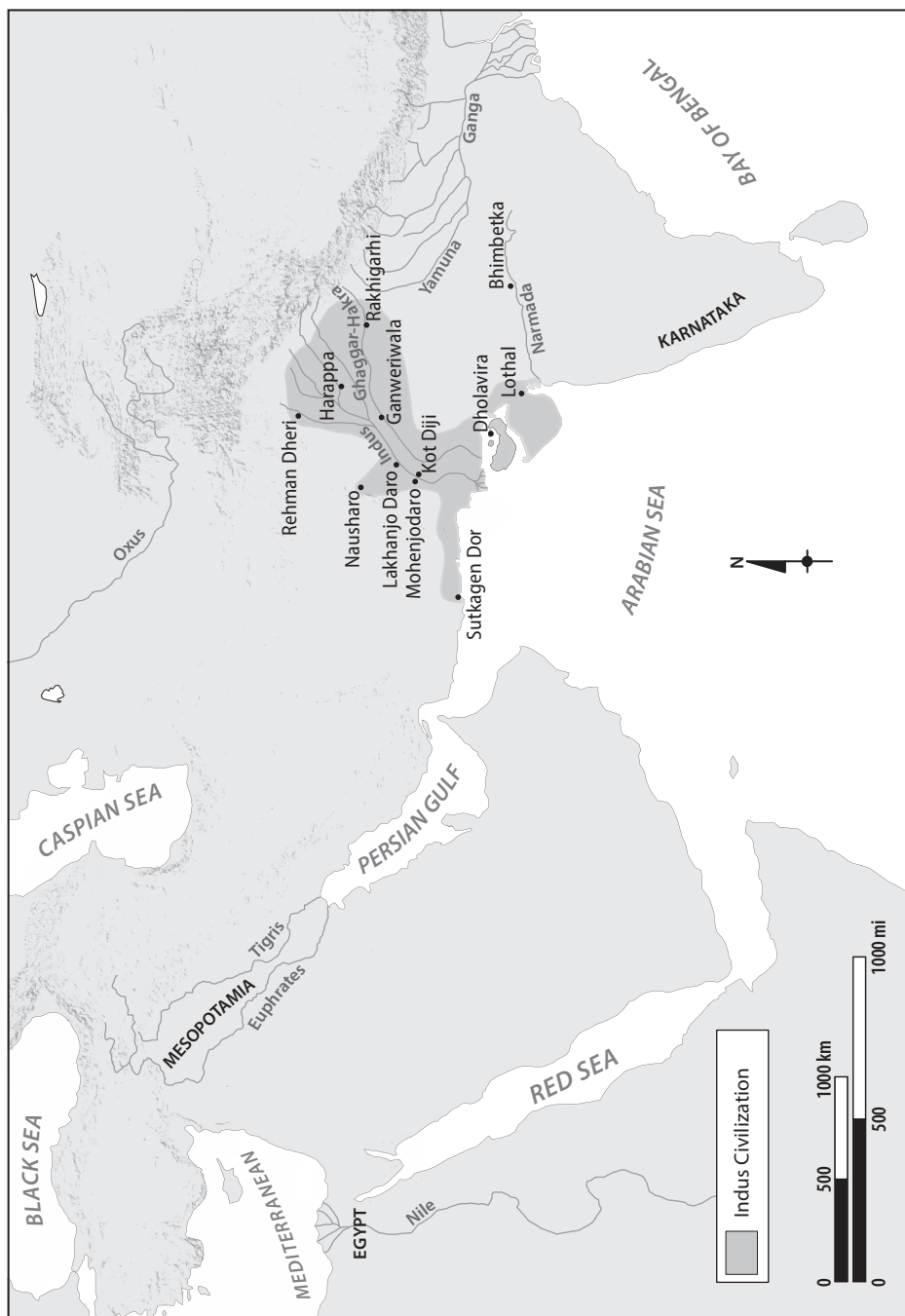
My goal is to diversify the standard cast of South Asian history. More boldly, I aim to challenge what we take to be standard and offer a more comprehensive, representational, and compelling approach to the South Asian past.

History is full of sad stories, with and without silver linings. To quote the Ghanaian American novelist Yaa Gyasi, “Some people make it out of their stories unscathed, thriving. Some people don’t.”¹² I narrate moments of loss, pain, and difficulty—for South Asian individuals and communities—without sugarcoating and thereby honor them and their lives. I know that some prefer a more celebratory tone to historical narratives, but fulfilling that modern desire requires that we elide many pre-modern peoples’ harsh realities. Over time, it means that we collectively forget huge parts of history, which is antithetical to the historian’s charge to remember. In these pages, I seek to evoke the breadth and depth of South Asian lived experiences.

Embedded in my embrace of historical breadth is a broad-ranging empathy. I consider not only the feelings of the living but also of the dead, honoring past generations of South Asians by being accurate about their experiences. I invite readers to do likewise, working through their modern emotions—surprise, uncertainty, discomfort, distaste, and anger—at the pain and travails of the past (and that I recount them in an unvarnished fashion). Thereby, readers might encounter the treasures of history, including the perspectives and realities of earlier generations. I cannot promise a tale of beautiful things, for that is the prerogative of fiction. But I offer true stories in these pages and so contribute to what the American poet Amanda Gorman has described as “the preservation of a light so terrible.”¹³

The intended result of my efforts is an innovative history of India with notable appearances from the rest South Asia. Narrative renewal is good since, as the Jain scholar Merutunga wrote in Sanskrit about 700 years ago, “Because they have been heard ad nauseum, / old stories no longer gratify the minds of the wise.”¹⁴ I offer here a new history, crafted to be relevant in the twenty-first century while avoiding a perspective warped by contemporary ideas. It can be hard not to make the past, implausibly, about us moderns since, as the Sri Lankan novelist Anuk Arudpragasam has put it, “The present, we assume is eternally before us, one of the few things in life from which we cannot be parted.”¹⁵

But this is a misperception since the present is always becoming the past. In truth, the past is eternally before us, an ever-expanding catalog of human experiences. I turn next to the earliest points of human habitation on the Indian subcontinent to begin our exciting, circuitous journey through South Asian history.



Ancient India, ca. 2500 BCE.