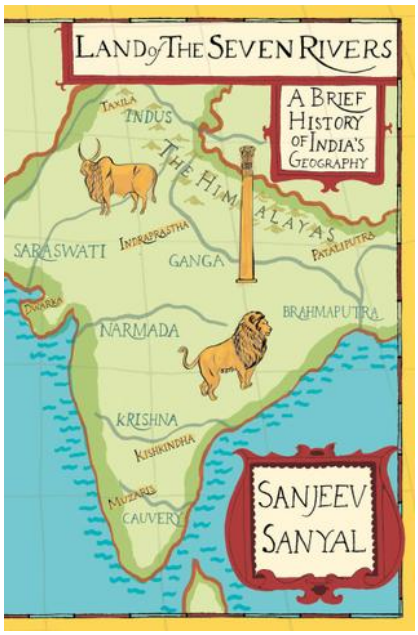
Book Review: Land of the Seven Rivers: A Brief History of India's Geography

blog admin

Sanjeev Sanyal *sets off to explore India and look at how the country's history was shaped by its rivers, mountains and cities. He traverses remote mountain passes, visits ancient archaeological sites, crosses rivers in shaky boats and immerses himself in old records and manuscripts.* ***Ian St John*** *thinks this is a book more for the general reader or traveller looking for an engaging but not overly demanding introduction to the historical background to contemporary India.*

Land of the Seven Rivers: A Brief History of India's Geography. Sanjeev Sanyal. Penguin. February 2013.



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Land of the Seven Rivers is an affable book that meanders, rather like the rivers it describes, through the familiar landscape of the history of the Indian sub-continent. Along the way we pass most of the landmarks one would expect: the Harappans, the Vedas, Ashoka, the Ramayana and Mahabharata, the various cities of Delhi, the Mughals, the British and their mapmakers, Partition, as well as the rise of a new India exemplified by the rapid growth of Gurgaon, a centre for the call-centre industry south of Delhi and characterised by 'gleaming office towers, metro-stations, malls, luxury hotels and millions of jobs.' (p. 291) There are some curious by-ways along the journey. Why, for instance, are no lions depicted upon Harappan seals? The climate was too moist for them apparently – although this causes some difficulties for one of the book's most unexpected propositions: namely, that the Vedic hymns (where lions are mentioned) were the product of the Harappan civilisation.

Sanyal quotes from recent genetic testing that suggests that although there are genetic linkages between Europeans and North Indians, the particular variants of the genes found in both places point to the two populations splitting from common ancestors in the region of the Persian gulf at least 8,000 years ago – much earlier than traditional accounts of an Aryan invasion from central Asia around 1,500 BC would suggest. There was no Aryan invasion bringing the Vedic religion and the author concludes that 'My own sense is that the Harappans were a multi-ethnic society, rather like India today. The Rig Vedic people could well have been part of this bubbling mix' (p. 57).

Ghats on the Ganges River: Photo by Dey

According to Sanyal, the *Land of the Seven Rivers* is “an attempt to write a brief and eclectic history of India’s geography. It is about the changes in India’s natural and human landscape, about ancient trade routes and cultural linkages, the rise and fall of cities, about dead rivers and the legends that keep them alive” (p. 3). As this description suggests, it is very much an impressionistic survey and to call it a history of India’s geography is rather exaggerated. Geographical aspects are considered and referred to – rivers, roads, the building of cities etc. – but they are not integrated into the narrative: they are incidents to be noted as are others of a non-geographical nature. There is little real attempt to situate the events within a geographical context in terms of the relief of the land, the varieties of soil or climate, the types and productivity of agriculture, the systems of irrigation or land tenure and their relationship to social and political structures. The following passage might be considered indicative:

“I do not want to leave the reader with the impression that medieval India was only about the building, pillaging, abandoning and rebuilding of cities. One must remember that most of the population lived in rural areas. Babur tells us that Indian villagers rarely invested in either irrigation or in building permanent homes. Instead, they were ever prepared to abandon their villages and take refuge in the forests. This is how the common people had coped with the previous three centuries of invasion and war” (p. 166).

Clearly a passage such as this hardly addresses the nature of rural life under the early Mughals in the manner that might be expected in a book about the relationship between Indians and their lived environment, and the impressions of Babur are surely not the first and by no means the last word on the practises of the Indian villagers.

Of course, one should not be too hard on the author here for he does not claim to have set out to provide a systematic geographical treatment of Indian history. Rather, as he admits, "the book focuses on a somewhat different set of questions: Is there any truth in ancient legends about the Great Flood? Why do Indians call their country Bharat? What do the epics tell us about how Indians perceived the geography of their country in the Iron Age? Why did the Buddha give his first sermon at Sarnath, just outside Varanasi? What was it like to sail on an Indian Ocean merchant ship in the fifth century AD…." and so on (p. 3). As will be apparent, this is a light-touch selective review of Indian history for the general reader by an author who, as a professional economist, is far from a specialist in Indian history. This has some merits. The book covers a wide range of material in a manner that does not fatigue or overwhelm the reader in the way that more detailed histories of India so often do. Sanyal skips deftly between regions and civilisations, and his rather naïve written style will be approachable to many readers unfamiliar with the material presented. A passage like the following is typical:

"However, one should not get the impression that Delhi was a city merely of grand palaces and imperial mosques. The majority of the people of Delhi were common folk – shopkeepers, artisans, servants, soldiers and so on. These people lived in huts made of mud and straw that were built between and around the great palaces of the nobility. In other words, Shahjehanabad suffered severely from slums, that perennial problem of modern cities…There were also shops selling a variety of kebabs and meat preparations. Old Delhi remains home to some excellent kebab shops" (pp. 197-8).

A pleasing feature of the book is the space it devotes to the extensions of Indian civilisation into South East Asia – into countries like Vietnam, Thailand, and Java – matters which conventional accounts of this scope often neglect and which yet illustrate for the author a shift that occurred in the mentality of Indians, from a risk-taking entrepreneurial culture that led merchants to found new Indian settlements overseas to, by around 1000 AD, a more rigid and closed civilisation much less open to the possibilities of travel and trade beyond India. The key to India's recent economic and social resurgence has been, argues Sanyal, its recovery of its earlier spirit of discovery and trade and communication with the rest of the world – as represented by the "Indian diaspora", some 25-30 million strong, which "thanks to globalization and technology…can now maintain business, personal and cultural links with India in ways that would have been unthinkable a generation ago" (p. 301).

Land of the Seven Rivers is, in brief, an impressionistic survey of the long sweep of Indian history, beginning with the first humans entering India from the Persian Gulf and culminating in the rise of a modern, shiny, and increasingly urban India as the sub-continent enters the 21st Century. Lacking serious analysis or the kind of detail that can open to the reader real insights into the lives and problems confronting Indians of past times, it is a book for the general reader or traveller looking for an engaging but not overly demanding introduction to the historical background to contemporary India.

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Ian St John studied for a Doctorate in Modern History at Nuffield College, Oxford. He is the author of Disraeli and the Art of Victorian Politics, Gladstone and the Logic of Victorian Politics, and The Making of the Raj: India under the East India Company. Since 2000 he has taught History at Haberdashers' Aske's School, Elstree. Read more reviews by Ian.