



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

Sanjeev Sanyal

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Did the Great Flood of Indian legend actually happen? Why did the Buddha walk to Sarnath to give his first sermon? How did the Europeans map India?

The history of any country begins with its geography. With sparkling wit and intelligence, Sanjeev Sanyal sets off to explore India and look at how the country's history was shaped by, among other things, its rivers, mountains and cities. Traversing remote mountain passes, visiting ancient archaeological sites, crossing rivers in shaky boats and immersing himself in old records and manuscripts, he considers questions about Indian history that we rarely ask: Why do Indians call their country Bharat? How did the British build the railways across the subcontinent? What was it like to sail on an Indian Ocean merchant ship in the fifth century AD? Why was the world's highest mountain named after George Everest?

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

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From Reader Review Land of the Seven Rivers: A Brief History of India's Geography for online ebook

Rajat Ubhaykar says

The Land of Seven Rivers is an oversimplified, inaccurate history of India with a pronounced nationalistic tilt (Sanyal seems to believe in the Out of India theory, though he is not confident enough to proclaim this outright). His writing is substandard and lacks the nuance essential to good history. (I would recommend John Keay's India: A Brief History for an unbiased, accessible, almost poetically written history of India)

I find it difficult to understand what Sanyal set out to achieve with this book. The subtitle claims it to be A Brief History of India's Geography, but that it most certainly is not. It reads more like a collection of random, often interesting, facts laid down chronologically; facts that have more to do with the various phases of urbanization in India than geography. Geography, at best, provides a background to historical events in this narrative. The Saraswati river (predictably) makes many appearances in the book, as Sanyal traces the historical evolution of Indians' geographical knowledge through textual sources like the Vedas, Mahabharata and Ramayana. Another major theme in this book is India's trade links with other cultures and places, through which India exported its culture and civilization. Sanyal writes about this with typical nationalistic pride that is tinged with nostalgia for the glory days.

However, what's most annoying is how Sanyal constantly marshals silly parallels between India's past & present in a bullheaded attempt to prove India's civilizational continuity (not that I deny it). He also makes up wild theories without providing any source for the same, which totally ruined his credibility for me. He constantly attempts to buttress his point that Indians were not an ahistorical people, as most Western scholars are wont to assert. In this, I partly agree with him. However, if one compares our sporadic, hagiographic record-keeping to the almost obsessive, detached documentation of ancient China, we fare poorly. Sanyal's primary argument to prove Indians' historical consciousness is the Ashoka edicts and how succeeding dynasties (Guptas, Tughlaqs as well as the British) inscribed their names on various edicts and hence saw themselves as the inheritors of an ancient civilization. And lastly, he has a massive boner for the lion, both as an animal and as a signifier of royal authority that has followed India down the centuries and today graces India's official emblem.

The Land of Seven Rivers ultimately is a book that believes in the questionable motto: "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story." Please avoid. There are much better history books out there.

Arvind says

3.5/5 Liked the first half which gives some interesting info and makes some bold statements. The last chapter dealing with post-independence India was uninteresting and stale to say the least.

Edited later :- Having read The Lost River: On The Trail of the Sarasvati , and Gem in the Lotus: The Seeding of Indian Civilisation i have gained new perspective on why Sanjeev Sanyal's theories on the Indus-valley civilisation and the Aryan invasion theory may actually be right. And if u r new to the debate, this is the book for u to get started as it is a fast read without compromising on intelligence.

Dinkar Sitaram says

Really good and well written. Includes a review of recent genetic evidence as well as an interesting theory about the relationship between Sanskrit and Avestan

Ankur Sharma says

one of most interesting book that i have read till the day, open up the whole world of possibilities and takes a peculiar view on he history of india. the most important partb of the book is when author discuss our origin as indians. it shows pan india view of the author.

the possibilities are endless a must read for each lover of history and geography.

ANUSHKRITI says

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Land of the Seven Rivers

By Sanjeev Sanyal

The book 'Land of the Seven Rivers' is a unique attempt to present a historical narrative analysing the geography of land over a period of time. Sanjeev Sanyal embarks to investigate India and take a glance at how the nation's history was moulded by its streams, mountains and urban communities. He navigates through remote mountain passes, visits antiquated archaeological destinations, crosses streams in flimsy vessels and drenches himself in old records and original copies. This is a book more for the general reader or explorer searching for a connection however not excessively requesting prologue to the authentic foundation to contemporary India. Land of the Seven Rivers is an approachable book that winds through the recognizable scene of the historical backdrop of the Indian sub-continent. It talks extensively about the culture, growth, progress and geography of India.

The Aaryans made it to the land through the Hindu-Kush mountains via Khaibar bypass. But the Indian sub-continent certainly existed since long ago. It was called the "SaptaSindhu" area; "Sapta" meaning seven, and Sindhu is amongst one of the most important rivers in the history of Indian sub-continent. It is stated that the Indian civilization shaped at the banks of these rivers and grew to what it is now. Scholars often refer that the words Hindu and India are rooted in Sindhu. Cultures have historically evolved along the banks of rivers as they facilitate the needs of a society to form and expand. The seven rivers Indus, Brahmaputra, Krishna, Saraswati, Ganga, Narmada and Cauvery (Kaveri) played a crucial role in the Indus Valley Civilization. The book has made an attempt to describe the vast intellect of Indians since historic times.

It refers to many examples which reflect the fact that India had a strong history and has shown integrity similar to country states. Following examples highlight the point: A column conveying "a statement by Emperor Ashoka from the third century BC" is one of "two Ashokan columns that Sultan Feroz Shah Tughlaq got transported from Topara close to Ambala, Haryana to the city of 'New Delhi' of its time and another pillar in the Qutub complex, New Delhi, which is pure iron piece and has not rusted since 15th

century, with carving devoted to the Hindu god "Vishnu" and has conquests stories of a king named, Chandra. To link with the history, the Islamic kings allowed the pillar to stand. Another association that India has to its past – is the proportion 5:4 that was utilized in the town planning of Harappan cities in the 3000 BC. The advanced urban planning of Harappan civilisation cannot be beaten till date. The city of Dholavira in Gujarat is 771 meters by 617 meters. Thousand years later, a similar proportion is seen in Hindu writings like the Shatapatha, Brahmana and Shulbha Sutra that uses the same proportion in building fire-altars for Vedic purposes. The Iron Pillar of Delhi is designed in a similar proportion: the length of the column is 7.67 meters while the segment over the ground is 6.12 meters (a proportion of 5:4). A third illustration is the customary Indian system of measurements and weights that to some extent looked like those utilized by the Harappan people. The distinction was about 1.8 percent – which is fairly good for a time interval of four thousand years. Even in the field of trade, India had successfully flourished with different parts of the world. This custom of trade continued for many years, till the eighteenth century, until the plunder by the East India Company after the Battle of Plassey in 1857 began, which overturned trade drastically and is continuing till today. Maybe a strong basis behind why India remained a peace-lover yet social superpower for centuries lies within its capacity to understand different cultures and societies. In the course of the narrative, we come across the greater part of the points of interest one would expect: the Vedas, Ashoka, the Ramayana and Mahabharata, the different urban communities of Delhi, the Mughals, the British and their mapmakers, partition, and in addition the ascent of another India manifested by the formation and rapid growth of Gurgaon, a focal point for the call-centre industry, south of Delhi and identified by shining office towers, metro-stations, shopping centres, lavish lodgings and a large number of occupations and businesses. There are some inquisitive by-routes along the way.

Sanyal cites from ongoing hereditary testing that recommends that despite the fact that there are hereditary linkages amongst Europeans and North Indians, the specific variations of the qualities found in the two spots point to the two populaces parting from basic predecessors in the district of the Persian inlet no less than 8,000 years ago – considerably sooner than customary records of an Aryan attack from Central Asia around 1,500 BC would propose. There was no Aryan intrusion bringing the Vedic religion and the author infers that his sense is that the Harappans were a multi-ethnic culture, rather like India today. The Rig Vedic individuals could well have been a piece of this foaming blend.

As indicated by 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 depiction proposes, it is particularly an impressionistic study and to consider it a past filled with India's geology is fairly misrepresented. Topographical perspectives are considered and alluded to – waterways, streets, the working of urban communities and so on – yet they are not incorporated into the story: they are episodes to be noted as are others of a non-geological nature. There is minimal genuine endeavour to arrange the occasions inside a geological setting as far as the relief of the land, the varieties of soil or atmosphere, the sorts and profitability of agribusiness, the frameworks of water system or land residency and their relationship to social and political structures.

Obviously, one ought not be too hard on the author here for he doesn't profess to have embarked to give a precise topographical treatment of Indian history. Or maybe, as he concedes, the book centres around to some degree a distinctive arrangement of inquiries such as whether there is any fact in antiquated legends about the Great Flood; for what reason do Indians call their nation Bharat; what do the legends enlighten us concerning how Indians saw the geology of their nation in the Iron Age; for what reason did the Buddha give his first sermon at Sarnath, simply outside Varanasi; what was it like to sail on an Indian Ocean merchant ship in the fifth century AD. As will be obvious, this is a light-contact specific survey of Indian history for the general reader by an author who, as an expert market analyst, is a long way from being a specialist in Indian history. This has a few benefits. The book covers an extensive variety of material in a way that does not cause exhaustion or overpower the reader in the manner in which that more point by point narratives of India usually do. Sanyal skips deftly amongst districts and civilisations, and his fairly innocent composed

style will be agreeable to numerous readers new to the material exhibited.

A satisfying element of the book is the space it gives to the expansions of Indian civilisation into South East Asia – into nations like Vietnam, Thailand, and Java – matters which regular records of this scope frequently disregard and which yet delineate for the writer a move that happened in the attitude of Indians, from a hazard taking entrepreneurial culture that drove shippers to establish new Indian settlements abroad, by around 1000 AD, a less flexible and closed civilisation significantly; less open to the potential outcomes of movement and exchange beyond India. The way to India's ongoing monetary and social resurgence has been, contends Sanyal, its recuperation of its prior soul of disclosure and exchange and correspondence with whatever remains of the world – as spoken to by the "Indian diaspora", some 25-30 million in number, which because of globalization and innovation... would now be able to look after business, individual and social connections with India in ways that would have been incomprehensible an age back.

Land of the Seven Rivers is, in short, an impressionistic study of the long range of Indian history, starting with the early people entering India from the Persian Gulf and coming full circle in the ascent of an advanced, sparkling, and progressively urban India as the sub-continent enters the 21st Century. Lacking required investigation or the sort of detail that can open to the reader genuine bits of knowledge into the lives and issues going up against Indians of past occasions, it is a book for the general explorer inquisitive to learn more about his country ; in terms of both its historical and geographical context.

Arathi Mohan says

Got this book as a birthday gift from a dear friend. She had thoroughly enjoyed reading it and knew that I would too. This book proved to be a crash course of all the social science classes learnt in high school. Never a dull moment in the book. With interesting chapter names like "Of Genetics and Tectonics" and "Trigonometry and Steam", it is a well-paced read with nice anecdotes. It is neither geography nor history. Indeed, it is the story of the evolution of civilization over the centuries. Although it starts with the supercontinent theory and the origins of man, later it shifts focus to the region and people that would come to be known as India. The author sketches all the major civilizations that have occupied Indian territories - the Indus civilization, the Mauryan empire, the golden age of Guptas, the might of the Southern Cholas, the rocky outcrops of Vijayanagara, the coming of the Mongols (Mughals) and finally, the Europeans. The book ends on a speculative note, what the future holds for the Indian civilization.

Akhila says

Awesome book! I always wanted to understand how our mythological world & the scientific world links together and this is the book that explains all that & more! Are the RigVedic people & the Harappan people the same? What is it to be Indian, what is our 'collective memory', genetics, tectonics, cartography - this breadth this book covers is amazing!! Really interesting read!

Shahine Ardeshir says

The title of this book is what hooked me: "A brief history of India's geography". The problem is that the book doesn't live up to it: There is nothing brief about the history it covers, and there's less and less

geography as it progresses.

The biggest problem for me was that Sanjeev Sanyal took too much. He starts as early as the Harappan civilization, and ends in modern-day India. In eight chapters, it's impossible to do justice to such a vast span of history in a country as old and diverse as India. So for me, he bit off way more than he could chew.

Also, the book becomes less and less centred around geography and becomes a series of interesting facts mish-mashed together in historical time periods. So while the content itself has interesting moments, it has no flow and ends up being repetitive in its style and unending in its direction.

A great idea for a book, but a misleading title for this one. Not worth a read at all, in my opinion.

Himanshu says

The Land of seven Rivers by Sanjeev Sanyal is a wonderful Read. It has beautifully linked the interconnection between history and geography and how one reinforces another. Sanjeev has come up with some major themes during the course of the book. (1) Growth of Indian civilisation has been continuous and not haphazard (from urbanisation In harrapan period whose many facets are still preserved and used in the modern India, inscriptions on Ashokan Pillar where later kings also wrote about their own achievements, inscriptions of different kings near Sudarshan Lake, importance of ratio 1.25 in our civilisation which is preserved from the time of Harrapa and many more examples) (2) Cyclicity of events(Eg: Arabs, when they were dominating sea trades, came to western coast of India and later mixed with the native population and Mopillas are their descendants. And now they are going to Arab nations for economic reasons to complete this circle) and (3) Importance of Lion in Indian civilisation (From Ashokan Pillars to later only reserved for royal hunting during Mughal period to Singapore getting its Name when a Malayan tiger was mistakenly understood as Lion by Prince of Srivijaya kingdom to finally Indian government adopted it as part of our official emblem) .

The chapters about Harrapan civilisation, following Saraswati and how earlier civilisation moved eastward owing to drying up of Saraswati are thought provoking. Specially the chapter about voyages of Indian traders as well as of Vasco Digama and Zheng He is a fascinating read, which also makes us understand the importance of cartography and its pertinence which again came to the fore during the Indian-Chinese Tension during late 1950s and culminated into a full fledged war.

The book is full of interesting anecdotes. Will mention one here:: The author met two Swedish citizen during his visit of Zanzibar. Their ancestors were Gujrati Muslims and Settled in Zanzibar in late 19th century though later forced to move out due to racial tension in 1960s. Now these two Swedish had come back to rediscover their roots. Though they had never visited India, they were communicating to each other in kutchhi language(language of Kutch region of Gujarat) and still enjoying gujarati snacks!! And the book is full of such interesting anecdotes.

After reading it, one can understand the author's painstaking journey of 2.5 years for writing this book and he virtually takes you to these places of history with his powerful writing.

The only negative I can recall is about lesser emphasis given to the southern kingdoms except the Cholas and and the Vijaynagram (though southern coastal regions are exhaustively covered) and rushing during the 1700-1947 period.

There are few books which make me sad at the completion of it because the journey which you were living with the book comes to an end. This is right their at the top. Highly recommended for reader who are interested in the history and geography of India.

Adithya Jain says

This is the best book on Indian history that I have ever come across. Although it is a narrative of India's geography and history, objective and straightforward, you'll never get bored. The fact that the author has gone through a lot of material and has been at the various places mentioned in the book, is evident from the detailed narrative. The narrative can be a little pacy at times, but the author never ceases to amaze you by the facts that he brings out in this book.

You'll enjoy it thouroughly if you are a history enthusiast. Well I'm one and I've already set it apart for reading it again.

A wonderful book and worth a read any day.

Sandeepan Mondal says

This book is highly recommended if you are inquisitive about how India's geography influenced its history and vice-versa. The author has done good research using mostly contemporary sources about topics which are contentious like the origin & decline of harappan civilization and out-of-India migration theories (as opposed to Aryan invasion theories). The author has also touched upon how tectonic and seismic forces shaped the world we live in today. This book makes for a fast read and the author has touched upon many aspects of the Indian influence in south-east Asia mostly, which are accurate according to the latest research in various journals and books. The reader is advised to go through the bibliography at the end of this book and read a few books from which the author has drawn his conclusions.

This book should not be treated as an academic book (for UPSC aspirants) or a history book (like John Keay's India: A history). All in all, an engaging read which succeeds in amusing the reader and firing up his imagination with respect to major happenings in India's past.

Riku Sayuj says

The author repeatedly claims uniqueness to his book by saying it is about 'the history of India's geography'. The introduction detailing out this objective for the book makes a case that this is an interesting way to look at Indian history and, to be honest, it is. However the rest of the book, except for the first chapter, barely acknowledges this supposed orientation.

There is nothing that distinguishes this from the other books on Indian history that I have read, except that the author is clearly nationalistic in outlook, has a penchant for wild theories, and is always willing to give priority to a good story over confusing details, in the interest of brevity or maybe, bias. The book reads like a standard, if stylized, history. And for that, there are many better books out there.

Piyush Behera says

Though Initially grudging to go for this one, I started this after the suggestion from one of my childhood pals. The initial pages though dint let my spirits down, there are theories regarding many questions which I thought to be at first inane which emerged to be the most settling issues in the hindsight. The book answers many a questions in a narrative way, binding very essence, coursing through the very historical rationality. History shall be like a story and should never be learned in rote memory which I first learned with Ramachandra Guha has also been exemplified over here. Nonetheless, four stars for this riveting and grappling read...

Abhinav Agarwal says

"Five millennia, one history, one nation, one helluva book."

Short review: This book is a second, much grander and a much better attempt by the author to answer one question. This time around though, he goes deeper and farther back in the history of the land of seven rivers - India, presents us with his findings, and posits that India has had a sense of history - one that not only goes back several unbroken thousand years, but has found echo in successive empires and invaders seeking to associate themselves with this history. As the author travels through the country - in time as well as geography - we are treated to some long-forgotten incidents that should have been part of our curricula, as well as fascinating insights into such endeavours as the mapping of the country by the colonials, which itself was a source of competitive advantage in a manner of speaking. The second question, which the author attempted to answer in his first book, but with less than middling success, is why India went into decline a thousand years ago. The answer, my friend, is blowin in the wind, and you need to turn the pages to find it. The truth is out there in the hardcover. A must read. Makes it to my best books I have read in 2013. See my full review at <http://blog.abhinavagarwal.net/2013/0...>

Shekhar says

Very interesting facts about India which I have not known until now even though I have lived and been to the places mentioned in this book. Starting from the Harappan civilization to the Gupta period to the Mughals to the domination in South East Asia to the colonial rule, being accountable to more than 1/3 of world GDP at one stage to more than 10% until the end of 19th century, I came across many facts about India that astonishes me. Did we have a nationhood in the past or did India as an idea only came into being about 2 centuries ago is well answered. The traditions that continue for more than 3000 years made me simply nod with acceptance. Until 1850s Madras was the largest city in India and Calcutta was the second largest, how Delhi lost its importance and Bombay was still a small city leased at £10 per month by East India Company is astonishing. How the coming up of Suez Canal changed the prominence of Mumbai and how cartography played a major role in the sudden change of India's importance from 16th century is well drafted. Overall a good book to read if one is interested in India and her past.
