

GRADUATE STUDENT FORUM



BIBLIOGRAPHY ON INDIC CIVILIZATION WITH REFERENCE TO ISLAMICATE: EXPLORING THE CIVILIZATIONAL IDENTITY OF SOUTH ASIA

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The emergence of terms such as India, Indic, Bharat, and Hindustan raises intriguing questions about their political, social, and religious implications and their impact on the worldview of South Asian people. Can we truly speak of an Indian civilization, and if so, how do we define it? Is there a distinct Indian religion that can be attributed to the Indian subcontinent, or is India primarily a geographical entity that embodies the essence of Indian or Indian civilization? Is India an ecumenical civilization?

Hodgson's preference for "Indic" (The Venture of Islam V1) in this context prompts us to examine its dynamic nature in order to define the Indic civilization. That is to say, civilization is constantly evolving due to the interaction and encounter of various cultures and civilizations, and in modern times, due to technological advancements such as the internet and modern transportation, Indian civilization needs to be reimagined or re-interpreted.

Romila Thapar, a prominent Indian historian, and her works are a turning point in the representation of Indic history, civilization, and culture. She argued that India as a Hindu civilization was a colonial narrative by the mid-20th century. The colonials, unable to find India's history equivalent to the Greek and Chinese, framed Indian history in 1817 as "The History of British India" during British rule in South Asia. This interpretation persisted among historians and scholars until the history of the first millennium came to light. Consequently, many aspects of South Asian history remained in the shadows and were sidelined. In an interview, Professor Thapar highlighted how the ruling class projection differs from the relationship of common people in India¹. That is to say, the ruling class or minority does not represent Indian civilization. Thapar also asserts that plurality has

1 Professor Romila Thapar in Conversation with Teesta Setalvad (Full Interview), *Hillele TV*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCDnX2DMu8M>. Accessed: Nov 2023.

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been the strength of Indian civilization and its richness. “Modi India” is the revival of colonial interpretations of Indian civilization by pretending to be indigenous or true Indian civilization and history.

On the other hand, a new narrative comes up by Deepak Sai, who is not a historian but a public intellectual. He challenges historians like Romila Thapar and Irfan Habib, another Indian historian, saying that their narrative is garbage and people should discard it. He asserts that their historiography is a projection of Nehru’s imagination, which is not rooted in the Indic essence. By saying this, Deepak Sai indicates towards the Muslim history in India. He wrote two books recently and they have become bestselling books on this issue: one is “India that is Bharat” published in 2021 by Bloomsbury (Delhi), and the other is “India, Bharat and Pakistan: Constitutional Journey of A Sandwich Civilization.”

The reason I include these two books in the list is that I wanted to hear and register various voices, so no voices are left unheard in order to think and imagine Indic civilization, whether in isolation as RC Guha critically says “frog in the well” or as an ecumenical civilization, as understood by Marshall Hodgson, RC Guha, Romila Thapar, and Irfan Habib. Deepak Sai, in his book, brings the discussion of invasion for both Muslims and British, and also in another book, “India, Bharat and Pakistan,” he starts India with the fall of the Mughal empire and the Pan-Islamic movement, which is the hottest topic in Modern Indian history. Irfan Habib has also dealt with this topic, especially in one of his articles on Ahmad Sirhindi and Shah Waliullah, who were perhaps the founders of the Pan-Islamic movement. Habib has been very critical, but his historiography yet does not advocate the monolithic approach. Deepak Sai, on the other hand, creates a monolithic Indic history and civilization by reducing Muslims and British to outsiders.

RC Guha, another prominent modern historian, argues that India has never been a monolithic civilization. He contrasts it with the European model of Nationalism which propagated three points: First, privileging of a single religion (Hinduism); second, privileging of a single language (Hindi); and thirdly, privileging of a common external enemy (Pakistan). Guha quoted Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore to define Indian patriotism and nationalism as “the acknowledgment and appreciation of our inherited and shared diversity, our cultural, social, linguistic, religious, ethnic ecological diversity.”² In my view, when Guha talks about Indian nationalism, he represents the Indian culture or pluralistic culture which can be

2 Ramachandra Guha on ‘Patriotism versus Jingoism’, *The Wire*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YpvoxIKHpZ8>, accessed: Nov 2023.

equated to the “Kulturbildung” of Germany. That is to say, presenting Indic civilization in the embedded form of Nationalism or patriotic Nationalism.

The reason I am bringing the modern history of India into the discussion and what is the relation of modern Indian history to the Indic civilization is very obvious — whether modern India was established on the basis of Indic civilization or not, whether India gained independence from all colonial elements or not, whether it followed the heritage of Indic civilization. That is to say, modern India was the reflection of Indic civilization. This question was for both Hindu and Muslim leaders who were powerful at that time and appeared rivalry to each other. As a result, multi-cultural history was sidelined, as Bhimrao was representing it, and modern India appeared in the custody of either Hindu or monolithic interpretation civilization. Nevertheless, those who imagined “Whether it followed the heritage of Indic civilization?” were in three groups: one who imagined Indic civilization as a common heritage which included Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Parsis, Christians, Jains, Jews, and others. The second group’s thought was based on the Vedic or single Hindu civilization, and the third group’s vision was similar to the second one but was based on Islam and its superiority over others (for more, one can read a recent scholarship of SherAli Tareen “Perilous Intimacies”). There was another thought about Indic civilization; it was Bhim Rao Ambedkar who was talking about the foundational change based on Buddha’s and Bhakti saints’ teachings, whose concern was the marginalized group of people in the Indian subcontinent, who have been oppressed due to the caste system. I think the title of Deepak Sai’s second book expresses the matter of Indic civilization that it is sandwiched between India and Pakistan.

On the issue of the entire debate surrounding the binary construct of Hindu-Muslim and its historiography as right and left, I include two scholarly books: one by Richard Eaton, titled “India in the Persianate Age 1000–1765,” and another by David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence, titled “Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia.” The significance of these two scholarly works lies in their exploration of the binary or monolithic construct of Indic civilization.

Richard Eaton’s comprehensive inquiry and findings regarding the cultural development of South Asia, influenced by Islamic or Persian elements as reflected in Vijayawada, are crucial to consider. His work also addresses the contentious debate on the destruction of temples by Muslims, adding depth to the overall discussion.

Furthermore, the book “Beyond Turk and Hindu” initiates a serious inquiry into why Islam has not yet become indigenous like other religions in South Asia. It challenges the

notion of fixed and irreconcilable religious identities between Muslims and Hindus in the region. The book suggests that the idea of “Hindu” as a religious category was influenced and, to some extent, developed by the British colonial perspective. Lawrence and Gilmartin propose that the fixed and exclusive labels of “Hindu” and “Muslim” were not inherent to the historical context of South Asia but were partly constructed and perpetuated by colonial translations and categorizations. The book argues against the existence of an unbridgeable divide between how religious identities operated in modern and precolonial settings. It asserts that while terms like “religion” and “nation” carry modern connotations, the processes of identity formation have similarities across historical periods.

Both scholarly works highlight the historical religious disparities and complexities in the interactions between these two communities in South Asia since its inception. All this information raises important questions about the study of Indic civilization as a monolithic civilization or even a binary Hindu-Muslim civilization and underscores the need for a thorough reexamination of definitions or categories in understanding Indic civilization. In this quest, I have found three intriguing and primary sources that will be beneficial to understand Indic history and civilizations. First, Megasthenes, a Greek ethnographer who visited India during Chandragupta Maurya’s reign (the Buddhist Period), wrote about India, its people, society, and religion. Second, Huin Tsang, a Chinese traveler who came to India during the decline of Buddhism, specifically during the Harsha Dynasty. Third, Alberuni, who arrived after the rise of Islam and Islamic rule and engaged with South Asians, is appreciated by Romila Thapar. These sources warrant a closer examination to reevaluate the Indic civilization and history. For example, Megasthenes describes Indian society divided into seven parts, whereas Alberuni speaks of a society divided into five castes. This discrepancy prompts serious questions about identifying India as a Hindu civilization before the advent of Islam.

Along with all these literatures, I included a book by the prominent Indian historian RC Majumdar, “Ancient India” which starts with the prehistoric period and goes up to the end of the Gupta Period. I also include an edited volume, “The History and Culture of the Indian People,” which is in 11 volumes. The first five volumes contribute to the history of Indic civilization before the advent of Muslims. The sixth volume contributes to the Sultanate period, the seventh volume contributes to the Mughal Period, and the last four volumes contribute to the British Period and India’s Freedom struggle. However, I will be focusing more on his book “Ancient India,” which covers a wide range of topics before the advent of Islam.

One of the books I would like to include is by Avijeet Bhattacharya. As a traveler and fiction writer, his interaction with the physical world adds a much more interesting perspective to consider. His book “Journeys on the Silk Road through Ages: Romance, Legend, Reality” also provides insights into the interconnectedness of various cultures and civilizations through trade and the exchange of goods and even language. Chapter 10 of the book delves into the rise of Muslims and its widespread impact through commerce and merchandise. It also includes various notes from travelogues such as those of Hiuen Tsang and Marco Polo.

One particularly interesting and comprehensive chapter that holds significance is the one on the Silk Road, culture, civilization, and the historical timeline spanning from 400 BC to 166 AD. This chapter is anticipated to offer a detailed exploration of the Silk Road’s impact on culture, the development of civilizations, and a chronological overview of historical events during the specified time period.

I also include the book of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, who wrote the book “Discovery of India” during his imprisonment by the British. He imagined India not simply as a geography but as people who constituted India, whether Hindu, Buddhist, Parsi, Christian, Jews, Greek, and Muslim. His imagination of Indic civilization was similar to the Gandhi imagination, whom RC Guha advocates and appreciates.

I will also include the book of Bhimrao Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste,” which I believe is crucial to understanding Indic civilization and its elements including the caste oppression and practices in India while also linking it to Alberuni’s India, when he saw India how it was and how Bhimrao Ambedkar found India in his time. Along with Ambedkar, I include a Hindi work of Bhagvan Das, Valmiki Jayanti Aur Bhangi Jati, which addresses the different community parallel to the “Hindu” or the Vedic.

I will also include the book of Friedrich Max Muller, “India: What Can It Teach Us?,” who was the first German Indologist to come to India and write about Indic society and culture. The book is not as substantive as the above-mentioned ones but would be interesting to read to see how a German understood India.

I also include a book by Wendy Doniger, an American Indologist and scholar of Hinduism, “The Hindus: An Alternative History.” It is a work of history and religious studies. It narrates Hindu beliefs and religious practices in chronological order. Doniger attempts to overturn the narrative of Hindu history favored by Hindu nationalists, which she sees, like Thapar, rooted in colonial narratives and prejudices. Doniger argues that Hinduism is not a single, static religion, but rather a complex and diverse set of beliefs and practices that have evolved

over time. She explores the many contradictions and tensions within Hinduism, including the caste system, gender roles, and the relationship between Hinduism and other religions. The book covers a wide range of topics, from the origins of Hinduism to the present day, and includes discussions of Hindu art, literature, and mythology. Doniger's approach to Hinduism is controversial, and the book has been the subject of criticism from some Hindu groups who argue that it is biased and disrespectful to their religion.

I further include the book "Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300" by Romila Thapar, which is her new periodization. It was her first scholarly work, which was expanded to AD 1800. Thus, in her imagination of Indic civilization, Islam is very clearly included. Thapar's book represented one of the first survey attempts to integrate culture and religion with social and historical processes. She was often inspired by Marxist and anthropological approaches but was hardly bound by them. Second, "A History of India 1" remained among the first surveys available to Western audiences to cross the divide separating 'ancient' and 'medieval' India in a self-conscious and critical manner. Thapar pointed out the problems of the existing schemes of periodization and resisted the temptations of religious or communally defined epochs. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it explicitly foregrounded issues such as evidence, methodology, and approach, beginning with a history of approaches to early India — all with the specific goal of creating a critical awareness of the problems of writing the history of early India. Another work of Romila Thapar I include is "Sakuntala Texts, Readings, Histories." This work is the commentary of Romila Thapar on the classical work of Kalidas, "Sakuntala," which is related to the Mahabharata and also the name of India as Bharat. Remarkably, similar narratives can be discovered in the Jataka tales (which narrates the life of Buddha), showcasing the enduring significance of the concept of Bharat as a civilization or geographical imagination.

I also include the book of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Vivekananda, who is a modern Indian spiritual guru, philosopher, and an ideal for the group of people who imagine Indic civilization as the monolithic civilization. The book is "Teachings of Swami Vivekananda" and "A Source Book in Indian Philosophy." These books deal with spirituality and philosophy in South Asia. Along with this, I include Rigveda, Bhagavad Gita and Ramayana, which become dominant in the Indian subcontinent after the fall of Buddhism in South Asia. It will be interesting to read parallel to Wendy Doniger's work "The Hindus: An Alternative History."

I include the work of Fernand Braudel, 'A History of Civilizations,' which I believe is significant in this whole discussion on civilization. It explores how the notion of civilization

emerged and evolved, delving into the implications of the term ‘civilization’ and other terminologies. The work scrutinizes how these concepts are attached to specific time periods and spaces, and how they undergo change, taking on new shapes. The book will give a comprehensive theoretical understanding of the discussion.

Finally, I include a recent book by Himanshu Roy, published in 2023, “Social Thought in Indic Civilization.” It presents an interdisciplinary perspective on pre-colonial social thought. It draws on the methodologies and research traditions of history, political science, and sociology to look at major themes and social processes to provide a comprehensive understanding of the society in the historical setting contextualized in the social and political relations of the time. The arguments, facts, themes, and interpretations presented in the book are usually not found in mainstream academic narratives. This book explores a range of key themes such as non-violence in religious praxis; dharma in Indic social traditions; medicinal concepts and institutions; ideas and praxis of *Shastrarth*; knowledge traditions and institutions; music traditions; and *Stritva* in texts and praxis.

This diverse range of sources, including books that reference the aforementioned concepts, shapes the geographical imagination of India through culture, religion, and abstract ideas. Through this bibliography with the exhaustive reading it entails for my comprehensive exams, my ultimate goal is to gain a profound understanding of Indic civilization across time and space, and then leverage this knowledge to develop an engaging undergraduate course.

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