

BACKGROUND BOOKS

INDIA

Until the late 18th century, few attempts were made to study India's ancient past. And not until the 1920s were large-scale excavations undertaken by the Archaeological Survey, which the British Viceroy, Lord Curzon, had reformed and enlarged in 1901.

Profiting from the digs at Mohenjodaro and Harappa, A. L. Basham's **The Wonder That Was India: A Survey of the Culture of the Indian Sub-continent Before the Coming of the Muslims** (Grove, paper, 1954; Taplinger, cloth, 1968) begins the story 2,500 years before Christ. At that time the once-fertile Indus Valley in the northwest (today a part of Pakistan) already supported an advanced pre-Aryan civilization.

Basham provides absorbing detail on this rich agricultural society. Its great cities boasted brick houses and sewers at a time when neither amenity was known to the distant forebears of the British archaeologists who dug up these artifacts. The succeeding Vedic (Hindu) and Buddhist eras (c. 1500–500 B.C.) were followed by Alexander of Macedon's invasion in 327–325 B.C. and the temporary establishment, soon aborted, of small Greek kingdoms in the northwest. The Greeks were the only foreign intruders until Muslim invaders came not just to raid but to rule in late medieval times. Thus, India's ancient civilization differs from those of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece in that its earliest traditions have been preserved to the present day. "The humblest Indian," Basham writes, knows the names of "shadowy chieftains who lived

nearly a thousand years before Christ, and the orthodox Brahmin in his daily worship repeats hymns composed even earlier."

Those chieftains, and warring gods and demons, figure in South Indian novelist R. K. Narayan's retelling of **The Mahabarata** (Viking, 1978) and **The Ramayana** (Viking, 1972, cloth; Penguin, 1977, paper). Both are modern renditions of 2,000-year-old epics still regularly re-enacted in village pageants or in more sophisticated urban theaters on Hindu holidays. Also a good read is Anglo-Indian writer Aubrey Menen's mock-heroic version of **The Ramayana** (Scribner's, 1954; Greenwood reprint, 1972). Iconoclastic and anti-Brahmin, it was banned in the Republic.

Many translations exist of the even earlier *Rigveda* (c. 1500 B.C.), and of the *Bhagavad-Gita* hymns (curiously embedded within the war story of *The Mahabarata*). Also available are *The Upanishads*, philosophical treatises developed over several centuries, and *The Arthashastra* (c. 300–450 A.D.), a sort of Hindu version of Machiavelli's *The Prince*.

All are best approached with a good guide, such as Heinrich Zimmer, the famous German scholar, whose **Philosophies of India** (Pantheon, 1951; Princeton, 1969, cloth & paper) has been superbly edited by American mythologist Joseph Campbell.

Several excellent historical surveys cover the whole 4,000 years from Vedic to modern times. The most complete and dependable, albeit strongly British in its emphasis,

is **The Oxford History of India** by Vincent A. Smith (Oxford, 1919, 1968), edited in its later editions by Percival Spear. The reader may want an Indian antidote—perhaps in diplomat K. M. Pannikar's **A Survey of Indian History** (Bombay and New York: Asia Publishing House, 1954, cloth; 1972, paper). Another is Jawaharlal Nehru's **Discovery of India**, a less chauvinistic chronicle than Pannikar's even though the future first Prime Minister wrote it in a British prison (John Day, cloth, 1946; Doubleday-Anchor, 1960, paper).

Most American readers will probably find Percival Spear's **India: A Modern History** (Univ. of Mich., 1961; rev. ed., 1972) the most useful of all one-volume surveys. Spear focuses on "the new India" that was born in the Mutiny of 1857, but he does not skimp on the ancient and medieval periods nor the heyday of Muslim influence in India under the Mogul emperors.

The effects, early and late, of a millennium of Muslim influence are well chronicled and analyzed in H. G. Rawlinson's **India: A Short Cultural History** (Praeger, 1952).

Piratical Arabs invaded the coastal area of Sind in the 8th century A.D. Then in 1001 Mahmud of Ghazni swept into Peshawar, killing and looting. Wave after wave of Muslim invaders from central Asia—Turks, Afghans, Moguls—followed. The Mogul dynasty, which began with Babur, a descendant of Tamerlane and Genghis Khan, extended its sway over most of the country, ruling supreme from Agra and Delhi until their empire began to unravel after the death of the great Aurangzeb in 1707.

Westerners who visit India today can see much of its early history in the Muslim architectural monu-

ments and the surviving Hindu and Buddhist antiquities. These are illustrated and explained, along with sculptures and paintings, in **The Art of Indian Asia: Its Mythology and Transformations** (Pantheon, 1955; Princeton, 1960). Vol. I consists of a text by Heinrich Zimmer, edited by Joseph Campbell. Vol. II is a cornucopia of black-and-white photographs by Eliot Elisofon and others of sculpture, drawings, paintings, mosques, temples, tombs, stupas, and commemorative pillars.

Also recommended are Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's pioneering **History of Indian and Indonesian Art** (Dover, 1965, paper), first published in 1927, and **The Art of India** (Abrams, 1977), a new one-volume compendium (1,175 illustrations) by Calambur Sivaramamurti, director of New Delhi's National Museum. Americans may prefer the dry prose of Zimmer/Campbell's classic study, but Sivaramamurti's book has the advantage of showing 180 wall paintings, Rajput miniatures, sculptures, and buildings in color.

The British were responsible for the preservation of Mogul emperor Shah Jehan's memorial to his beloved Mumtaz Mahal (the Taj Mahal) at Agra and many other architectural treasures throughout India. They also left their own architectural mark on the Indian landscape—in the airy, high-ceilinged colonial houses and the monumental red sandstone government buildings of New Delhi. The new capital city, designed by Sir Edward Luytens, was built late (1912–31) in the British period that began with the East India Company's first establishment of a port warehouse at Surat in 1612.

Most readers know something of the British in India—if only through Kipling's classic *Kim* (1901), E. M.

Forster's 1924 novel, *A Passage to India*, John Masters' popular best-sellers (*Bhowani Junction*, *Nightrunners of Bengal*, *The Deceivers*), and the evocative Bengal- and Kashmir-based stories of the Godden sisters, Rumer and Jon. A good, little-noticed novel by Paul Scott, **Staying On** (Morrow, 1977), poignantly describes the hill-station retirement and decline of a British Army couple who at Independence in 1947 elect not to go "home" (where, essentially, they have never been).

The East India Company and the British raj occupy much space in the historical surveys mentioned above, and memoirs and critical analyses flesh out the description of events up to the transfer of power and division of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan.

One well-written account, pro-British but otherwise balanced, ranges from 1599, when London merchants petitioned Queen Elizabeth for a charter "to traffic and merchandise" in the East Indies, to the final trooping of "the King's Colours" through the Gateway of India out of Bombay in 1947. This is **The Men Who Ruled India** (St. Martin's, 1954, cloth; Schocken, 1964, paper) by Philip Woodruff, a former member of the prestigious Indian civil service.

Woodruff's labor of love, now only available in libraries, is divided into two volumes. **The Founders** brings to life the bold, greedy merchants of the East India Company, and their dealings with the Moguls, and chronicles the mid-18th-century revolution in Bengal, the 19th-century Sikh Wars, the final conquest of the Punjab, and the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. **The Guardians** describes the civil administration of a vast territory, one-third the size of the United States, by what

was never more than a few hundred young English district officers. They were supported when necessary by an army that, in 1939, had only 50,000 British troops and 150,000 Indians (Sikhs, Gurkhas, other warrior castes).

Biographies and critical studies of Indian leaders—both those who led the freedom fight and those who have held power since Independence—include Louis Fischer's **The Life of Mahatma Gandhi** (Harper, 1950; Macmillan, 1962, paper) and Erik H. Erikson's **Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence** (Norton, 1969), a psychobiography by the inventor of the genre. Among the many books on Jawaharlal Nehru, one that stands up well is Michael Brecher's **Nehru: A Political Biography** (Oxford, 1959; Beacon, 1962, abr. ed., paper).

Western social scientists have created a cottage industry out of the study of rural and urban life in independent India, its output as voluminous as all the published history that has gone before. Some village studies make good reading, but much of the scholarship is turgid and narrow. Contemporary fiction gives the general reader a far better sense of the changing patterns and stresses of life in India today.

The bloody horrors of Partition have only begun to subside from North Indian minds. Khushwant Singh, journalist and scholar of Sikhism, published a novel, **Train to Pakistan** (London: Chatto & Windus, 1956; Grove, 1956, paper; Greenwood reprint, 1975, cloth), that gives a devastating portrayal of the 1948 deaths of up to 1 million people—Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs—moving from one new nation to the other.

The problems (and pleasures) of South Indian life have a different

cast. The widely-read novels of R. K. Narayan, (*Bachelor of Arts, The Guide, The Financial Expert, Mr. Sampath*, many others) are published in the United States by Viking and the Michigan State University Press. All are set in Malgudi, a mythical town in his home state of Mysore that bids fair to become a South Indian equivalent of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. A lesser-known collection of Narayan's tales is **A Horse and Two Goats** (Viking, 1970).

The title story satirizes the gaps in Indo-American understanding through a brief, hilarious encounter between a U.S. aid technician, who wants to buy a clay statue of a horse he sees along the roadside, and a peasant who thinks he's selling the American his two goats.

Much read in India, as in England and the United States, are the novels of Polish-born Praver Jhabvala (*The*

Householder, The Nature of Passion, To Whom She Will). Her keenly observed tragicomedies of contemporary Indian urban life often depict nouveau-riche entrepreneurs, their gossipy wives, and yearning daughters.

If one had to choose a single literate book on the Republic of India's social and political development, foreign policy, and politics over the past 30 years, from an American viewpoint, the winner might be **The United States and India, Pakistan, Bangladesh** (Harvard, 1953; 3rd ed., 1972, cloth & paper) by W. Norman Brown.

Brown was for many years the head of the University of Pennsylvania's South Asian studies program. His book offers a bonus: a solid bibliography directed to the interests of the general reader. We suggest it as a supplement to this essay.

EDITOR'S NOTE. *Many specialists recommended background books on India, more books than we could mention here. Among our advisers were: Edward A. O'Neill, Lawrence A. Veit; Dennis H. Kux, former country director for India and Nepal, U.S. Department of State, now serving in Turkey; William J. Barns, author of **India, Pakistan, and the Great Powers**; and Wilson Center Fellow Manakkal Venkataramani.*