

Ancient India and Indian Civilization

P. Masson-Oursel,
H. de Willman-Grabowska and P. Stern

Translated by M. R. Dobie

The History of Civilization



THE HISTORY OF CIVILIZATION

ANCIENT INDIA AND
INDIAN CIVILIZATION

THE HISTORY OF CIVILIZATION

General Editor C. K. Ogden

The *History of Civilization* is a landmark in early twentieth Century publishing. The aim of the general editor, C. K. Ogden, was to “summarise in one comprehensive synthesis the most recent findings and theories of historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, sociologists and all conscientious students of civilization.” The *History*, which includes titles in the French series *L'Evolution de l'Humanité*, was published at a formative time in the development of the social sciences, and during a period of significant historical discoveries.

A list of the titles in the series can be found at the end of this book.

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PLATE I



B



C



A

OBJECTS FROM MOHENJO-DARO

A. Bust. B. Seal with bull. C. Seal with zebu.

(From Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*)

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FOREWORD

THE INDIAN GENIUS

*I*N the Forewords to the two volumes on China in this series, I have at once pointed out the unity of human history and justified the separate position which we have given to two ancient civilizations of the East and the Far East—civilizations which are great, both in the numbers of the people whose native genius they express and in the brilliance or originality of certain manifestations of thought or art. The peoples of China and India were not, indeed, cut off from communication, material or intellectual, with the other sections of mankind—here Persia acted as intermediary—but they were nevertheless confined to very distinct regions, and did not give or receive to a great extent until a late period. Moreover, their fundamental conceptions present such marked differences from Western thought that recent writers have been inclined to describe East and West as two distinct worlds, whether they wished to show the irreconcilable antinomy between them or to resolve a contradiction which they regarded as merely provisional.

By very reason of its strong individuality—not political, but psychological—India, like China, is of the greatest interest in the history of mankind, which, as our colleague, Masson-Oursel, observes in a striking phrase, is the only real history.

History properly so-called, it is usually said, India has none.¹ Let us be clear what the word “history” means. It has two meanings, one objective and the other subjective. History can be events, or the memory of events.

The Indians have lacked the memory of events, or rather they have lacked not writing, but the use of writing, to record them. “Very little writing was done, and that very late.” Knowledge was “a personal gift and a caste privilege”, and

¹ “India has no history” (Sylvain Lévi, in “L’Inde et le monde”, in *Revue de Paris*, 1st February, 1925, p. 332). “It has often been said: this people has no history, or at least it has had no historians” (C. Bouglé, in *Essais sur le régime des castes*, p. xi).

“ every opposition was made to the spread of knowledge. Therefore it was not entrusted to writing, which was accessible to all ” (p. 221). Moreover, the very mind of the Indians “ seems to have a distaste for history ” (p. 22). The details of past events do not interest them, or it would be better to say that their interest in the past is “ not that of dispassionate curiosity but that of loyalty ” (p. 209); they turn to it for lessons and for claims to glory. The truth does not concern them.

The earliest works have no connection with history except that of the Bible or the chansons de geste.¹ Even in times nearer our own, in the twelfth century, in Kalhana or Bilhana poetic imagination and moral purpose militate against the author’s intention of presenting the facts.² It is true that one can, if one is cautious, extract some historical data from Indian literature. But it is mainly from the peoples which have a history, in so far as they have had dealings with India, that we learn something of that country’s past.³ For early times, it is ethnology, philology, and archæology that give and will give us some notion of the truth. From archæology much is to be expected. Masson-Oursel more than once emphasizes its possibilities as a source; and once again I may call attention to all the complementary and new knowledge which must be brought to the evocation of the past by the “ militant history ” of explorers and excavators.⁴

So India has had no historians. But that is not all. There is also some objective truth in the tradition of “ India without a history ”. It has no history, first, in the sense that its past does not offer clearly distinct phases, such as our own antiquity and Middle Ages or the periods before and after Christ. From the Aryan invasion to the coming of Islam, India is extraordinarily continuous in time. In space, on the other hand, it is extraordinarily discontinuous.

This immense region was peopled by a great number of immigrations. Although it is a peninsula with partly inhospitable coasts, defended on the north by the highest mountains on the earth, it is accessible by a few passes, chiefly in the west, and by sea, chiefly in the east.

¹ Purāṇas, avadānas. See pp. 260, 272.

² See pp. 280, 287.

³ See pp. 23, 34.

⁴ “An immense supply of notes on folklore, a searching examination of manners, a thorough clearing of overgrown jungles of literature, and an abundant booty of archæological finds would be necessary everywhere before a few inferences could be drawn ” (p. 117); cf. pp. 158, 160, 343-4.

"India," Pittard says, "was never an uninhabited land, over which a flood of comparatively late civilizations was to flow with the first races to occupy it . . . From the Quaternary onwards the soil of India has been trodden by the foot of man."¹ In the mass of Indian peoples with all their various types, ethnologists distinguish two chief groups—the Aryans or Indo-Afghans and the Melano-Indians or Dravidians, both long-headed but the latter smaller and darker.² A round-headed Mongolian element was added by continuous infiltration and occasional irruption. The philologists distinguish archaic languages (Munda), which are earlier even than Dravidian, and various Dravidian tongues, superimposed on and mingled with which is the contribution of the Indo-European immigrants. Aryan or Indo-Iranian is the original speech of the Indo-European group which settled on the plateau of Iran and the plains of the Indus. The Aryan spoken in India came to differ from that of Iran and to take various forms in India itself.

It was between the fifteenth and twelfth centuries B.C., according to J. de Morgan,³ that the Aryans entered India. They became the preponderant element in the country. But the other elements—the early inhabitants, who are called Austro-Asiatic, and the Dravidians, whom some connect with the Sumerians—not only survived but continued to be of importance in some parts of the peninsula. To make India something infinitely complex and heterogeneous, the "inextricable mixture" of the population (p. 81) has been further complicated in that enormous area by local environments of the most different kinds. Natural obstacles divide the country into regions which are unlike in climate, fauna, and flora, some being desert or mountainous and others luxuriantly fertile.⁴

"The world of ancient India is a chaos, because of differences of race and language and multiplicity of traditions and beliefs" (p. 59; cf. pp. 85, 210). Politically the country was broken up to an extraordinary extent, with a quantity of small republics

¹ Race and History, in this series, p. 388.

² *Ibid.*, p. 390.

³ See Ancient Persia, in this series, p. xi.

⁴ On the modes and limits of the influence of geographical environment, see L. Febvre, A Geographical Introduction to History, in this series. Cf. H. Bidou, "Au-dessus de l'Aste," in Rev. de Paris, 15th March, 1933—impressions of a flight over India, with sandy desert dotted with rocks and the "soaked, rank" landscape of Bengal (pp. 299-306).

(p. 88) alongside of monarchies which were always on the point of collapsing.

That, no doubt, is, from the objective point of view, the fundamental reason for saying that India has no history. Its past is too broken up—so much so that even a social principle as strict and as characteristic of the country as that of caste-distinctions is an ideal rather than the universal rule (p. 85). Apart from irruptions and invasions—of Indo-Europeans, Huns, Turco-Mongols—among the infinite multitude of facts of which the past of India is made up few have been sufficiently large and outstanding to be events. That happened when a “King of Kings”, as in Persia, succeeded in founding an empire—a “short-lived combination” (p. 93); thus “the ancient, permanent solidarity which united India to Iran” asserted itself (p. 59). Such figures as Asoka, one of the noblest in the history of the world,¹ Kanishka, Samudragupta, Siladitya, stand out brilliantly against the neutral background of India’s past.

“Only unified peoples can have a history.” India has had some episodes, but no history, for it has never been an empire, nor a patria, nor a nation.²

There is no Indian “nation”, but there is an Indian civilization, an Indian life, wherein religion plays a part which must be examined.

“While it is true in general,” says Masson-Oursel, “that among the various peoples the manifold functions of spiritual life, social or individual, only gradually break away from religion, it is particularly true of the civilization of India” (p. 61). Let us be quite clear about this. The functions of social life and the thought of the individual have had difficulty in “breaking away” from religion after the phase in which they were deeply involved in it. But I do not believe—it is fairly generally known³—that religion is in essence social, or that social organization is originally religious. In India, as everywhere else, there was development, and that is what appears in the cautious pages of Masson-Oursel.

¹ See Söderblom, *Manuel d’histoire des religions* p. 259.

² See p. 100. Cf. J. Sion, “*L’Asie des moussons*,” in *Géographie universelle*, vol. ix, p. 369.

³ See especially Sourdille, *The Religious Thought of Greece*, in this series, Foreword.

India has no more idea of evolution than historic sense. The West worships it, perhaps superstitiously. As our collaborator says, "in assuming a priori a development in the world of Indian thought, we run against native sentiment. Let us admit that the impulse to look for development in every domain, even when the facts do not compel us to do so, may be a European prejudice" (pp. 117-18). But, this reservation having been made, by a thinker whose sympathy with the East inclines him to defend its attitude of mind, he says that "we can and must attempt to look for changes in the course of the ages".

Now, we see here clearly that the social order among the peoples of India sprang, as in all countries, from the need inherent in every human group to maintain itself. At the beginning the Dravidians are in small agricultural communities, and the Indo-Europeans in clans. Religion does no more than reinforce the structure of the groups. The very special and remarkable institution of caste did not exist from the beginning, and it had many causes (p. 81). It was created by a "development" (p. 82), in which the Brahmans doubtless took a large part. They seem, not without struggles, to have superimposed a theory of their own on Aryan manners (endogamy within the phratry).¹ Where other civilizations unify, mobilize, and level, India tends to divide, to specialize, to arrange in order of rank.² The Āryas are a class apart; for the race of the "free element", which alone "can lawfully own property", must be preserved (pp. 85, 113). Among the Āryas themselves, there are three classes, kept strictly separate—the Brahmans, depositories of holiness and living gods, who aspire to theocracy; the warriors, who, under the lead of the Brahmans, exercise temporal power; and the husbandmen and traders. The immobility, the petrification found in India, is explained by the religious character and theoretic rigidity assumed by the social order.³ But it must not be supposed that the ideal of the system quite represents the reality of things.⁴ Various circumstances mixed the castes somewhat and also increased their number, restricted the power of the Brahmans, and gave the

¹ p. 84; cf. pp. 235, 240, 251, 253, 258.

² See Bouglé, *op. cit.*, p. 84. "Repulsion, hierarchy, hereditary specialization"—so he defines the caste system (p. 4).

³ Caste partly explains why India is not a nation. See Sion, *op. cit.*, p. 369.

⁴ pp. 86, 88, 95, 109, 113.

noble, warrior element great importance and sometimes preponderance. "A great development of policy" took place, always in virtue of real necessities, of the need of defence against enemies from outside or at home (pp. 87, 93, 95). "Police rule is better than anarchy" (p. 101).

Even the tendency to unify groups, so potent elsewhere, is to be found in India, in spite of all the influences to the contrary. Among the nobles, some created kingdoms, which were not far removed from empires—under the influence of Persia, as I have said, which was itself influenced by the Assyro-Babylonians. That kingship "is a purely human institution, and claims no divine right." When it was an accomplished fact the Brahmans proceeded to give it a religious sanction (p. 91).

At bottom, two conceptions of moral and political conduct are found in India, sometimes opposed and sometimes combined—dharma and artha, duty and interest, the rule and opportunism, a principle of stability and a principle of change (pp. 101-3).

"The usual definition of the Indian character is very incomplete."¹ The great mass of the peoples of India is imagined as plunged in dreams or mystic contemplation and lost in hopes and anticipations of Nirvana. Their detachment from terrestrial realities is exaggerated. A distinction must be made between different regions and periods. This is already proved by the indications which I have given as to social organization.² But there is a whole side of Indian life which only literature and art enable us to reconstruct. At the same time, through literature and art—as, from another side, through religions and philosophies—one reaches the Indian soul, even in a depth in which action and inaction are explained.

Mme de Willman-Grabowska and Philippe Stern, both endowed with a thorough knowledge of the æsthetic achievement of India, have made a most valuable contribution to this book. The former has described literary works in such a way

¹ See Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Manuel d'histoire des religions*, French trans., p. 815.

² For economics, see pp. 106, 110. ("We are too much inclined to forget that India was one of the greatest marine and colonizing powers of the past.") Cf. Benoy Kumar Sarkar, "Aspects politiques et économiques de la civilisation hindoue," in *Rev. de Synthèse historique*, vol. xlii, June, 1930, pp. 53-67.

as to make one see, not only their technical perfection, but—what interests us here still more—their underlying inspiration, their relation to the inner life. By delicate analysis and happy quotation, her work offers a kind of anthology, which reveals various states of soul with remarkable vividness. M. Stern has drawn, in a vigorous summary, new in several respects, a picture of the development of the plastic arts which reinforces her psychological evidence and confirms the suggestions of literature.

The earliest works of that literature, the Vedas, are late, and composed of elements much earlier than the time of their composition. They were directed towards the sacred, interpreted, and supplied with commentaries by the Brahmanic priesthood; but they were “the fruit of an aristocratic and warlike civilization”, and the characters “enjoy life in the most violent way possible, and the beautiful simplicity of their religious faith is proved by many passages in the hymns not to have been the general rule” (p. 230). The later epics, while placing the Brahmans high, allude to struggles against their caste.

A whole courtly, aristocratic literature developed, a profane literature answering to the tastes of a refined and sensitive society.¹ The ardour of this people, originally “as passionate and uncontrollable in its hates as in its desires” (p. 235), gradually became more concentrated, more “æsthetic”. The wealthy, cultivated, “idle” (p. 303) class, far from despising life, sought out and multiplied emotions and delights.

Love and sensuality—and therefore women—occupy a great place in literature. “Woman is joy and sorrow, trouble and appeasement.”² Sometimes it is married love, the tenderest and most delicate sentiments,³ and sometimes it is the most burning passion and the most brutal eroticism, that are portrayed in lyric, drama, and romance.⁴ Song and dance, “the divinest of all arts” (p. 309), and everything that can add to the sensuous attraction of literary art often accompany it.

¹ The life of the people appears here and there, particularly in certain forms (farce, fable). But if popular elements were merged even in aristocratic works, what was born of the invention of the people was not preserved deliberately, and it is almost all lost.

² pp. 285; cf. pp. 394 ff.

³ pp. 282-4, 288, 316, 331.

⁴ pp. 239, 246, 278, 283, 287-8. See “the categories of sensation which should cause the souls of the spectators to quiver” in the theatre (p. 296).

So it is that one finds in the poetry of India gentle scenes of family life and human compassion.¹ One finds sympathy for all that lives, beast or plant,² and a deep sense of nature—hours and seasons, colours and scents. One finds, lastly—in the place of activity—a very lively imagination, addicted to the marvellous, to fairy-tales, to magic, to beautiful dreams in which real and impossible are allied.³ All these elements appear combined into endless stories, which are often, like the Arabian Nights, set one inside another.

The actual form of these works suits their matter—sometimes sweetness and harmony, almost always profusion of ornaments and images and dazzling colour, in addition to “tricks of the trade” (p. 279), stylistic acrobatics, and metrical complexities. Everything aims at lively sensation or at some mental trick of a subtle and futile kind.

In the plastic arts, Philippe Stern, distinguishing the truly Indian element from Iranian and Greek influences, reveals characteristics similar to those presented by literature. It is a “sensual” (p. 342) art, in which he first emphasizes the grace and harmony, “a keen sense of life” in sculpture, “a love of story-telling, immediate contact with reality, a movement which is never violent, and straightforward, simple love of all creatures” (p. 374), and then shows how the voluptuous and the influence of an overflowing imagination become more marked. Then decoration swarms over the stone masses of a sumptuous architecture, and art seems to adapt itself to the general immoderateness of everything.⁴

It was a mighty æsthetic effort, revealing an intense desire to live and to enjoy life—often ending in disillusionment and disgust. “Vain has been the life of a man who has not sought wisdom and knowledge,” is the answer made in a dialogue to one who has said, “Vain has been the life of a man who has not tasted the joys of love” (p. 288). By renunciation, those who seemed to have everything tend to join those who have nothing. Literature shows this “oscillation between two poles, frantic desire to live and complete abnegation” (p. 285). They are “very Indian” things. Perhaps here one should call attention

¹ pp. 268, 271, 277.

² pp. 264, 314, 324.

³ pp. 308-9, 324, 339.

⁴ pp. 342, 350, 360; Cf. P. Lorquet, *L'Art et l'histoire*, pp. 227-238. “India, which loves the colossal, excels no less in the dainty” (*ibid.*, pp. 236-7).

*to the effects of an overwhelming nature, a variable and deceptive climate. In a monsoon country human prosperity is particularly unstable. A dry and fairly cold winter is followed by a torrid spring, which already puts a check on life, and the torrential rains of summer. But in the less well-watered parts of India there is not always sufficient rainfall to feed the swarming masses of humanity, and the population is decimated and exhausted by famines. In districts where the waters of heaven and earth cause vegetation to run riot, the heavy, sodden atmosphere softens and weakens man and destroys his courage.*¹

“The wretched existence of the immense majority of Hindus” partly explains the character of personal religion and philosophic thought. In these masses “it has created a melancholy pessimism, a hatred of life”, and “inspired, by the transposition of facts into ideals, the conviction that under-nourishment and diminished activity were means to salvation”. Sects of the non-possessors, which do not aim at changing the social order, “take to themselves mighty compensations and incomparable reparations in the spiritual order” (p. 116). As for the privileged classes, satiety of goods, combined with physical exhaustion, drives them likewise in great numbers to spiritual escape.

Indian thought—certain elements of which are incorporated in art and literature—is described by Masson-Oursel in a remarkable study, at once very rich and very sober, of religions and philosophies. Here it is that one must look for the essence of India. It is true that many and varied influences have been active in this domain; but here we really find all that is most characteristic and original in India. Through the diversity and multitude of doctrines, which are such that their history, “far from being written, is hardly possible to write” (p. 117), and in their evolution, Masson-Oursel discerns the principle of unity which makes the special genius of India.

*We know that religion and magic are at first indistinguishable.*² *The magical character of the early religion of the Aryans,*

¹ See J. Sion, *L'Asie des moussons*, pp. 12, 14–15, 21, 54. Cf. the still interesting pages of Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, vol. i, chap. ii. “In the great centre of Asiatic civilization, the energies of the human race are confined, and as it were intimidated, by the surrounding phenomena” (p. 138, 1882 ed.). *He contrasts India with Greece.*

² See *The Religious Thought of Greece*, in this series, *Foreword*.

especially the Aryans of India, is very marked. What they sought to obtain "was the goods of this world—subsistence, a minimum of well-being, even wealth, a full life, not cut off by premature death, and male descendants" (p. 123). Means had to be found to affect things, the appropriate formula (this was not, Masson-Oursel remarks, truth; for a formula enables you to obtain something contrary to natural laws). "Being is thought of only in relation to action" (p. 126). The mythology of the Vedas, in part inherited from Indo-Iranian times, a mixture of different elements gradually accumulated in fairly arbitrary fashion, has far less significance and importance than the sort of "religious physical science" (p. 131) which catalogues and manipulates cosmic forces.¹ At the beginning is action—*esse sequitur operari* (p. 132). The sacrificial operation creates, preserves, transforms the world.² Words, accents, intonations, gestures, and chants have a mystical value, an efficiency. The notion of activity, *karman*, and the ritual formula, *brahman*³—these, in religion, are what will provide the basis for a philosophy, which, indeed, will not be clearly distinguished from religion, for in India religion itself is abstract and philosophical rather than mythical,⁴ as it tends to be more individual than social.

Brahmanism is later than the Vedic tradition, and it inherits and exploits it. This exploitation of *brahman* by the caste which holds it constitutes orthodoxy. But *Brahmanism* inevitably developed. A "decisive turning-point" makes meditation "an act more efficacious than the rite itself", and tends to substitute knowledge for sacrifice, knowing being only one case, particularly operative, of acting (p. 134). *Brahman*, ritual potency, was the expression of the virtue of the priesthood and the justification of its supremacy; *ātman*, the essence of every being and an element of universal life, reveals the absolute to the individual consciousness and gives it eternity in a kind of levelling pantheism.

¹ On the gods of India, see Chantepie de la Saussaye, *op. cit.*, pp. 324–336; they are "the product of several races and several peoples"; "3,339 gods did honour to Agni," a Vedic hymn says. In the popular religion there is "a horde of spirits and demons", *ibid.*, p. 406.

² The difference between sacrifice and magic "is simply that magic is addressed to demons and occult powers, while sacrifice is as it were official magic, practised on recognized gods" (*ibid.*, p. 341).

³ Before *brahman* became the potent formula it was perhaps *force*, *mana*. Cf. Söderblom, *Manuel d'hist. des religions*, p. 242.

⁴ pp. 129 ff.; cf. pp. 192–3, 244, 246.

In the sixth century B.C. heterodoxy all at once adapted itself to the evolution of Brahmanism, corrected it by its concern with moral matters, and reacted on it. One follows with the keenest interest in Masson-Oursel's survey the opposition and mutual penetration of Brahmanism and Buddhism. The latter, greatly influenced by Iran,¹ and favoured by continual invasions from the north-west, developed, like Jainism, "in an environment only slightly Aryanized and still less Brahmanized," in the north of the lower Ganges basin.²

In contrast to Brahmanic optimism, the heir of the Vedic tradition, which holds that man's needs can be satisfied, heterodoxy is fundamentally pessimistic; it proclaims the instability of the human condition, the misery of existence (p. 139). It expresses a kind of "collective despair". Transmigration—saṃsāra, a conception peculiar to India and not the same as metempsychosis—condemns all to an eternal becoming, a universal disintegration. Here karman is the activity which "steeps us in relativity and misery" (p. 140). Salvation will consist solely in escaping from the life of desire and passion, in seeking deliverance "beyond good and evil", which enslave man equally. One must turn away from the world and by knowledge, examining the conditions of existence, one must liberate oneself. For Buddhism, like Brahmanism in its later development, but from another point of view, stimulates thought.³ "There are two terms from which he who would live a spiritual life must remain remote. What are these two terms? One is the life of pleasure, given up to delights and enjoyment; it is low, without nobility, contrary to the spirit, unworthy, vain. The other is the life of mortification; it is melancholy, unworthy, vain. From these two terms the perfect man keeps aloof; he has seen the Middle Way . . . which leads to rest, to knowledge, to illumination, to Nirvana." Thus speaks Buddha, after his illumination, in the famous Sermon of Benares.⁴

Two Saviours, Jina and Buddha, both "of princely, not priestly family" (p. 138), stand at the origin of communities of monks and laymen, which were to increase and become diversified steadily. Buddhism, in particular, spread from Nepal,

¹ On this point, see S. Lévi, articles quoted, Rev. de Paris, February, 1925, pp. 542, 800.

² See pp. 45, 59-60, 137, 159.

³ On the influence of the dialectic of the sophists, see p. 143.

⁴ Chantepie de la Saussaye, *op. cit.*, p. 380. Although Buddhism was influenced by Yoga, an ascetic sect, it condemns excessive asceticism.

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