



The Past Before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India

By Romila Thapar

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The claim, often made, that India--uniquely among civilizations--lacks historical writing distracts us from a more pertinent question, according to Romila Thapar: how to recognize the historical sense of societies whose past is recorded in ways very different from European conventions. In *The Past Before Us*, a distinguished scholar of ancient India guides us through a panoramic survey of the historical traditions of North India. Thapar reveals a deep and sophisticated consciousness of history embedded in the diverse body of classical Indian literature.

The history recorded in such texts as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata is less concerned with authenticating persons and events than with presenting a picture of traditions striving to retain legitimacy and continuity amid social change. Spanning an epoch of nearly twenty-five hundred years, from 1000 BCE to 1400 CE, Thapar delineates three distinct historical traditions: an Itihasa-Purana tradition of Brahman authors; a tradition composed mainly by Buddhist and Jaina scholars; and a popular bardic tradition. The Vedic corpus, the epics, the Buddhist canon and monastic chronicles, inscriptions, regional accounts, and royal biographies and dramas are all scrutinized afresh--not as sources to be mined for factual data but as genres that disclose how Indians of ancient times represented their own past to themselves.

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Editorial Review

Review

From a scholar at the pinnacle of her field comes the much-anticipated book on ancient Indian historiography, *The Past Before Us*--a rich feast, and a work of the highest scholarship. It will be cited and commented on for years to come. Anyone interested in the question of historical consciousness and historical writings cross-culturally, or in ancient India, will have to read **Romila Thapar's** masterpiece, which is destined to be a classic in the field. (Thomas Trautmann, author of *Aryans and British India* and *Languages and Nations: The Dravidian Proof in Colonial Madras*)

Ancient Indian civilization was perceived as lacking historical consciousness. To this 'now dog-eared argument,' **Thapar**, one of the most prominent Indian historians living today, delivers a strong counterargument. Yet the book is not written polemically; rather, it is a careful and judicious account based on Thapar's erudition in Indian history and years of research on the subject...Reading this book would be an educative experience for many, not only for scholars of India. (Q. E. Wang *Choice* 2014-03-01)

About the Author

Romila Thapar is Emeritus Professor of History at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

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