



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

Sanjeev Sanyal

Penguin Books: New Delhi, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-143-42093-4

333 + XI pages

At first, people lived in the world of 'first nature,' in which the impact of humanity on the world was very minimal and the unequal distribution of desirable resources dictated the location of human settlements, whether temporary or permanent. As human ingenuity and diligence became more evident, first nature gave way to second nature, in which the unequal distribution of resources has been at least to some extent mitigated by resource extraction, transportation infrastructure, conquest and trade. Some places would still remain objectively better places to live than others but the differences had been evened out through human activity. People adapted to the conditions of nature and, at the same time, adapted nature so that it was more suited for human society. However, nature itself is not a stable and unchanging phenomenon: climatic and ecological systems are complex and variable in nature and, from the perspective of people in history, essentially unknowable and unpredictable. Propitiation of spirits or gods might be employed to try to encourage favourable conditions but experience has shown that this is not a guaranteed path

to success. A prominent example of how nature can change is the River Saraswati, which appears a number of times in India's voluminous records of the past – records which most commonly have philosophical or spiritual purposes and so can be rather frustratingly silent on some of the practical issues about which we might like to know more. In any case, the Saraswati was recorded as being the principal river in the land we now call India but, at some point, it seems to have disappeared. Did it become submerged? Did it dry up? Was it always a myth? Seeking answers to questions such as this has been a principal motivation for author Sanjeev Sanyal, who spent several years travelling around his country with a view to mapping its geography and trying to understand what impact this has had on the history of that land. This in itself raises one of the central issue underlying this book, which is the extent to which India – Bharat – can be considered a single and unified country. This issue is closely related to another with which Sanyal is repeatedly concerned, which concerns the sense or tradition of history within Indian people as a whole. One of the justifications for the British imperial project in the sub-continent was not just the usual nonsense about non-Europeans being unable to govern themselves effectively but that Indian people as a whole (I use the term here to refer to the whole extent of the colonized sub-continent) have no sense of the continuity of history and, hence, no real sense of statehood. This is an issue to which Sanyal returns repeatedly and, indeed, justifiably so. He provides a variety of phenomena and reasons for thinking that Indians, as much as anyone else, have a sense of their past and of the ties that link them to what occurred in the past. Based on his purview of using geography for this purpose, he highlights physical evidence that might be adduced to illustrate this and his narrative makes a persuasive case. It is a case that would, of course, be even more persuasive if his terms of reference had extended to the intellectual heritage of that land.

In any case, once the story of how the Saraswati disappeared from view and from record, the scene is set for the explanation of why, at least in some cases, certain castes and ethnic minority groups have

become locked into lives of inescapable misery as the conditions which once supported their livelihoods have changed, while society has not been able to progress. This idea, which I perhaps advance more than the author would allow, is rather speculative since there is a lack of data that would substantiate individual cases. Nevertheless, it is an interesting idea.

Sanjeev Sanyal writes engagingly about the sweep of Indian history, which is a subject that is so vast that it cannot possibly hope to incorporate every relevant subject in a work aimed at the general public and extending to no more than perhaps 100,000 words. As is common with works aimed at the interested general public, its principal value might turn out to be the inspiration it can bring to readers to find out more about the subjects covered in the text and its role as a starting point in encouraging those readers to discover more.