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*The*  
*Dancing*  
GIRL  
A HISTORY OF EARLY INDIA

“ Many knew Dr Balaji Sadasivan either as a doctor or as a politician, but few would have known that he had a keen sense of history. He was drawn to the study of history as a way of knowing the past that moulds people’s present and charts their sense of the future. Politics and history are intertwined. In this book, we have evidence of an historical mind that surveyed India’s place in time both broadly and deeply. Dr Sadasivan’s historical insights were not restricted to India but he was particularly keen in that area. This book makes good reading.”

**S Jayakumar**

*Former Deputy Prime Minister, Republic of Singapore*

“ It gives me great pleasure to write a few words for Balaji’s book dedicated to narrating some aspects of the history of India to appeal to the new generation.

Balaji has been a close friend and I cherish the days we were together as medical students in the University of Singapore.

I remember vividly his interest and inclination towards the arts. He and Swan Hoo both had the same appeal and it was also the chemistry which drew them together and strengthened their relationship as husband and wife later. As a student he researched and was passionately writing about the Malacca Sultanate apart from being involved in the drama productions of King Edward VII Hall.

It is very sad that Balaji was not able to complete this remarkable work on the history of India, but I am sure those portions that have been completed stand testimony to the passion he had for this subject. His aim was to reach out to the younger facebook and twitter generation who have somewhat relegated history to a distant position in their list of priorities.

I hope the book will kindle sparks of interest among the younger generation and stimulate them to relook history as they chart the course for the future.

I would like to thank Swan Hoo for remembering me and allowing me to share my thoughts in this book. Although Balaji has left us, his mission will continue and his spirit prevail through this book.”

**S Subramaniam**

*Minister, Ministry of Human Resources, Malaysia*

“ History is inevitably written from the perspective of the writer. By viewing the same history from different perspectives, one achieves greater depth of understanding and derives new insights. Balaji set out to write the history of India from the perspective of ‘a child of the diaspora, setting foot on Indian soil for the first time at the age of 35’. It was to be from the viewpoint of ‘a detached outsider’. Perhaps that was too modest a claim. True to Balaji’s character, *The Dancing Girl* an account of India’s early history, was written with affection, honesty and optimism.”

**George Yeo**

*Former Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore*

“ Even by the exacting standards of Singapore, Dr Balaji was an extraordinary Minister. If he sometimes embarrassed me by knowing more about the country I represented, I forgave him for the insights that he had just provided. His ability to integrate diverse strands of information was a great quality. Conversations with him on modern Indian history, particularly on choices not made, remain a vivid memory. His political background enhanced an ability to communicate easily across cultures. A regular presence at India’s diaspora gatherings, one sorely missed, his book should be as great a read as talking to him was a pleasure.”

**S Jaishankar**

*Ambassador of India to China*

*Former High Commissioner of India to Singapore*

“ I had the privilege of knowing Dr Balaji Sadasivan when I was Pakistan’s High Commissioner to Singapore during my term from 2004 to 2008.

Dr Balaji was a man of tremendous humility, decency and honesty. He demonstrated exceptional commitment and candour.

This book shows his deep interest and knowledge of one of the greatest civilizations that developed around the mighty Indus and Ganges rivers and their tributaries. The ruins of cities like Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro and Taxila are testimony to the thriving centres of learning in ancient times. Dr Balaji has looked into hitherto unexplored areas of history and culture that continue to enrich the lives of billions of people.

I am honoured to be associated with this book that will forever remain part of the legacy left behind by Dr Balaji Sadasivan.

ISEAS, true to its character, is doing a great service in publishing the works of a distinguished Singaporean.”

**Sajjad Ashraf**

*Former High Commissioner of Pakistan to Singapore*

*Visiting Senior Research Fellow, ISEAS*

*Adjunct Professor, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, NUS*

“ Dr Balaji Sadasivan was a dear friend, colleague and teacher. He was not only a world-class neurosurgeon, but also a polymath. His knowledge of history, in general, and the history of India, was astonishing. This valuable book brings back many happy memories of the ‘tutorials’ he gave me on the history of India.”

**Tommy Koh**

*Ambassador-at-Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore*

“ I came to know Dr Balaji Sadasivan in 2007, when he was appointed Chairman of the World Health Organization’s Executive Board. He presided over an especially challenging agenda with some potentially explosive items at the political as well as the technical level, including a strategy for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases that crossed paths with some powerful corporate interests. The notorious H5N1 avian influenza virus was likewise on the agenda, fuelling fears of an imminent influenza pandemic and much debate about fairness in the sharing of vaccines and medicines with the developing world should a severe event occur.

The Executive Board chaired by Dr Balaji occurred on my 19th day in office as the newly elected Director-General of WHO. I could not have been blessed with a better Chair for my own personal inauguration into the fast-paced debates that typify these meetings. I was deeply impressed by the way Dr Balaji skillfully and diplomatically steered the deliberations and negotiations. In the end, the Executive Board adopted 21 resolutions, all by consensus.

Apart from his vast knowledge of public health, its political dimensions, and its significance for foreign affairs, he displayed what I can describe, most simply and directly, as the spirit of a great and compassionate man. As a distinguished neurosurgeon, he was equally at home speaking about the power of medical technologies and the unmet needs of poor, often homeless people suffering from tuberculosis, items that were also on the agenda.

I knew him as a courageous leader in public health, and like many others, deeply regret his untimely passing. I am certain that the traits that so impressed me live on in *The Dancing Girl: A History of Early India*.”

**Margaret Chan**

*Director-General, World Health Organization*

“ Whatever Balaji Sadasivan did, he did with excellence and enthusiasm. He was a first class neurosurgeon who helped to create the National Neuroscience Institute in Singapore, then turned to political life and was in turn Minister of State for Health, the Environment and Transport, and later Senior Minister of State for Information, Communications and the Arts, Health, and Foreign Affairs.

For many years he worked on this book, *The Dancing Girl: A History of Early India*. Like Churchill's *History of the English Speaking Peoples* it is a work of love carried out over a protracted time but in the end an immensely readable and scholarly volume.

I had the honour of being part of Balaji's training during his time overseas in 1989 and followed his career of service with immense respect. He was thoughtful, affable, and very bright. His interests even then went far beyond the bounds of neurosurgery.

Balaji died too young, of an aggressive cancer. He lives on in several ways, however-through his wonderful wife Swan Hoo Ma, who saw this work to completion as a way of honouring her husband and their mutual love of history; through his children Anita and Dharma; through his contributions to Singapore life including the art gallery in the Supreme Court and City Hall; and now through this book. This volume reflects his humour, his breadth of intelligence, and his commitment to history and our understanding of the modern world. Like Balaji, it is energetic, funny, and thoughtful. It is a wonderful contribution to our understanding of the great Indian subcontinent.”

**Peter Black**

*Franc D. Ingraham Professor of Neurosurgery, Harvard Medical School  
President of the World Federation of Neurosurgical Societies*

“ Rarely does one come across a man with so much talent, so much enthusiasm and still with so much humility. He was clearly talented in every field that he touched; as a student before he studied medicine; as a medical student, as a specialist in neurosurgery in many prestigious medical institutions in the UK and US; as a neurosurgeon in the Government in Singapore and later as a leading neurosurgeon in private practice; and always as a friend to so many. Few however knew that he was a voracious reader and a passionate historian! It is such a great loss that he was taken away long before he finished some of his pet projects like the five-volume history of India which he had started in earnest whilst a Minister! His memory will serve as a beacon and an inspiration to everyone he touched. Most of us can only aspire to do in one lifetime a fraction of what Dr Balaji achieved in so short a time. His book aptly titled by him as *The Dancing Girl: A History of Early India* will always remind us of Dr Balaji's contribution to history and more importantly his stupendous character.”

**Sat Pal Khattar**

*Life Trustee, SINDA  
Vice-President, Singapore Indian Education Trust (SIET)  
Member, Indian Heritage Centre Steering Committee*

“ To write a book on India’s long and complex history is no mean task, and only the most committed and competent historian will dare undertake such a formidable challenge. Dr Balaji has bravely gone where few historians have dared to venture. Driven by his profound fascination with and deep passion for the history of India, Dr Balaji has succeeded in producing an engaging and insightful story that will appeal to a broad range of readers. This is truly a labour of love, a fitting contribution by an outstanding individual who wanted the children of the Indian Diaspora, of which he was one, to appreciate the civilizational richness of India.”

***Tan Tai Yong***

*Director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore (NUS)*

“ This is an excellent introduction to Indian history. It is well illustrated and clearly written. There are very few general surveys on pre-modern Indian history, this book fills that lacuna. It will surely draw a wide readership.”

***Tansen Sen***

*Associate Professor, Asian History, City University of New York  
Head, Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre, ISEAS*

“ Dr Balaji was a remarkable person. His wit and humour put all at ease. I remember fondly the many great moments when he spoke to children as young as Primary 3 to students from tertiary institutions offering advice and directions about their future. His knowledge of matters pertaining to the Indian community was incredible. He was able to offer examples from varied sources to support his points. As President of SINDA, during meetings, he listened to the points made by all and gave his well-thought out solution that was well received. This is a unique ability and made Dr Balaji well-loved by all at SINDA. I am happy that his transcript on the history of India is being published as a book by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS). I am very sure that this book will be of immense interest to all those interested in what is a unique interpretation of Indian history.”

***Raja Segar***

*Chief Executive Officer, Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA)*

“ I encountered Dr Balaji’s passion for Indian history when he articulated the vision for the Indian Heritage Centre project. In this book, his breadth of knowledge, attention to historic details and concern for rootedness will serve as a beacon to the young Indian Diaspora anywhere in the world. Here is a book on Indian history, for the children of the Diaspora written by a product of the Indian Diaspora.”

**Gauri Krishnan**

*Deputy Director (Research Unit) & Senior Curator (South Asia), Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore*

“ Dr Balaji wanted to tell the history of India in a simple yet interesting style that would appeal to non-academics, non-Indians and especially the children of the vast Indian Diaspora who may have never set foot in India. My sense is that the multi-talented doctor has succeeded in his endeavour.”

**P Thirunal Karasu**

*Chairman, PA Narpani Pearavai*

“ In the short span of time I worked with the late Dr Balaji Sadasivan, I have found him to be an admirable and wonderful person.

Despite his illness, he never failed to discharge his duties as Senior Minister of State in the Foreign Affairs Ministry and as MP to his constituents. He also worked tirelessly to fulfill his dream of writing this book.

It is most gratifying to know that his book has been completed and that many readers will benefit from his vast knowledge of Indian history.”

**Lilian Low**

*PA to 2nd Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs*

*(former PA to the late Dr Balaji Sadasivan)*





The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) was established as an autonomous organization in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are the Regional Economic Studies (RES, including ASEAN and APEC), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS).

ISEAS Publishing, an established academic press, has issued almost 2,000 books and journals. It is the largest scholarly publisher of research about Southeast Asia from within the region. ISEAS Publishing works with many other academic and trade publishers and distributors to disseminate important research and analyses from and about Southeast Asia to the rest of the world.

The  
*Dancing*  
GIRL  
A HISTORY OF EARLY INDIA

Balaji Sadasivan

**ISEAS**

INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES  
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# Foreword

India is a diverse country with a long history of cross-cultural interactions, complex philosophical ideas, and multifaceted literary traditions. To capture the intricacies of Indian history is no easy feat. For people of Indian origin who visit the country sporadically, their ancestral homeland can be mysterious, exotic, and incomprehensible. In his lifetime, despite ailing health, the late Dr Balaji Sadasivan spent long hours digging into India's ancient history to present his findings to the Diaspora Indians. Admirably, with great insights into important events, he has expressed his findings in a way that is exciting to read and easy to follow. His achievement is even more commendable considering that Dr Balaji Sadasivan was not a historian but a neurosurgeon and a full-time politician.

Divided into several chapters, *The Dancing Girl: A History of Early India*, covers over four thousand years of Indian history. From the Indus Valley Civilization, which produced the beautiful figurine of the dancing girl on the cover of this book, to the splendours of Islamic traditions under the Mughal empire, Dr Balaji has outlined the evolution of Indian religions and philosophical traditions, analysed the Buddhist interactions between India and China and the trading relations between South Asia and Southeast Asia, and given a fascinating account of the spread of Islamic ideas into India.

Every chapter of this book is carefully researched and organized. In the chapter titled "The Reformation", for example, Dr Balaji points out the complexities of Hinduism, its Vedic origins and its "reformation" during the Gupta and post-Gupta periods. At the same time, however, he is meticulous about the developments taking place within Buddhism and the support it receives from the Pala rulers of Bengal. He is also thorough in his discussions about the increasing importance of Buddhist monastic institutions and Hindu temples in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Although Dr Balaji notes that the book is intended for the Diaspora Indians, I am hopeful it will attract a much wider audience. Students of non-Indian heritage will find the discussion of India's contact with the wider world particularly useful. Dr Balaji's discussion of this topic comes from his personal involvement in the Nalanda initiative that sought to revive the Nalanda University in India. One of the world's earliest institutions of higher learning, as outlined in the chapter "The Giver of Knowledge", Nalanda attracted scholars and Buddhist monks from different parts of Asia. It imparted knowledge not only about Buddhism, but also about non-Buddhist philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and other subjects. Dr Balaji was intimately involved in this project and was often praised for his contributions by Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen, Head of the Nalanda Mentor Group.

A debt of gratitude is owed to Mrs Balaji Sadasivan for bringing to fruition Dr Balaji's aspiration to complete this manuscript. I must also thank the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies for publishing Dr Balaji's book. Works such as these are keys to comprehending the history of Asia and the connectivities among Asian societies and cultures. The publication of this book is recognition of Dr Balaji's intellect and his dedication to understanding Indian and Asian history.

**S R NATHAN**

President

Republic of Singapore

# Message

I met Dr Balaji Sadasivan in connection with our collective effort to reestablish an Asian international university at Nalanda, the site of perhaps the oldest university in the world. I could see that the erudite, soft-spoken doctor and foreign affairs expert harboured a fascination for history, especially the elements of South Asian culture that flowed to Southeast Asia to be creatively adapted in new ways. I did not know then that he was writing his own account of that history for the children of the vast Indian Diaspora. When Ambassador Kesavapany, Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), brought to my attention the existence of his manuscript, we could only be grateful that he had more or less completed it before his sad, untimely death. The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, must be congratulated for providing the finishing touches and further embellishing the work with pictures and maps.

Dr Balaji Sadasivan's book displays his eye for vivid detail and his ability to choose the most compelling anecdotes to illuminate larger historical themes. His skills as a story-teller will enable him to reach the younger generation of readers. This book is not boring! The stunning urban culture of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, the enlightenment of Gautama Buddha, the dharma of Asoka, the light of knowledge dispersed from Nalanda, the naval expeditions of the Cholas, are all depicted with great insight in the form of a stylish and eloquent narrative.

Had he been with us for a bit longer, I would have tried to persuade Dr Balaji Sadasivan of the grandeur of the Indo-Islamic cultural ecumene that was forged in the subcontinent during the last millennium under the patronage of regional Muslim Sultans and the great Mughal emperors who invited non-Muslims to be partners in building that magnificent edifice.

Nineteenth-century colonial accounts of the role of Islam in India had often privileged myth over history and emphasized the destructive rather than constructive dimensions of the rule by Muslim sovereigns.

One example will suffice to illustrate this point. Dr Balaji Sadasivan tells us that Lord Ellenborough, the Governor-General of India, at the time of the First Anglo-Afghan War “accepted the legend” that the gates of Mahmud of Ghazni’s tomb had been looted from the temple in Somnath. Needing something to claim victory in the aftermath of a catastrophic military debacle in the early 1840s, Ellenborough issued a proclamation on the gates and ordered his soldiers to bring them to India. But did the legend have any historical basis? It was clear from the type of timber and the style of the inscriptions that the doors were the work of north African craftsmen travelling east rather than the gates of Somnath being taken north by an invader. The doors were brought to India with great fanfare, but languished in a corner of the Agra Fort as an example of “Ellenborough’s folly”.

Dr Balaji Sadasivan’s book will entertain and instruct, while engendering, I hope, a healthy and civil debate. It will serve as a useful introduction for the new generation in Southeast Asia interested in tracing the history of what Rabindranath Tagore described as “India’s entry into the universal”.

**SUGATA BOSE**

Gardiner Professor of History  
Harvard University

# Message

Balaji was my best teacher. He taught me how to ride a bike, play bridge and how to write sonnets. He taught me many aspects of science, mathematics, economics, politics, law, and history. He taught me compassion, kindness and generosity through his fine example. He had told me that had he not been a neurosurgeon, he would have liked to be a history professor.

Before Wikipedia, he was my Balaji-pedia – my instant source of reference and information on anything and everything. Our courtship days were full of delightful engaging discourses on diverse subjects late into the nights. Our 34 years together were filled with never-ending absorbing discussions and dinner conversations during which he happily shared and imparted his wealth of knowledge. He was a great source of enlightenment.

When the National Museum of Singapore was reopening in 2006 with a gallery on the History of Singapore, we spent many nights discussing Singapore's history. I had endless questions for him as I was a volunteer guide with the museums and was preparing to guide at this new gallery. He had, as was often, such an extensive knowledge on the subject that I suggested he write a book on the history of Singapore.

Some months later, he informed me that he was thinking of writing on the history of India. What a gargantuan task this would be, I thought out loud. But he had it all figured out. There would be five volumes, each with fifteen chapters. The first volume would start with ancient India till 1200 CE; Volume Two would cover the period when India was under the Muslim rulers; Volume Three when India was under the British; Volume Four on India's road to independence and Volume Five on post-independence India. When he retired, he would take a couple of years off to visit and take photographs of all the sites that he would describe in his book. He also dreamed of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) making it into a documentary and showing it as a daily or weekly series on the HISTORY channel, one of his favourite television programmes.



Balaji loved to read. He read children's books, comics, poetry, plays, scientific periodicals, economic and financial magazines, newspapers, fiction and non-fiction. He had his reading material within easy reach throughout the house: on the floor and table by the bed, on the dining table, coffee table, his study, family room, our bathroom, in his car, in his suitcase. He had a remarkable memory and could provide great details, even years later, of all that he had read. Amongst his favourite bedtime books was Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* which he had read several times.

His reading style was rather unique. He "slept" as he read. During our days as medical students studying together in the medical library, as I underlined or highlighted the important points in my texts, he would read and nod off to sleep. When he awoke, he would read the next chapter and doze off again. After doing this for several chapters, he would get me to test him. I was always amazed at how he could remember every minute detail in our thick medical texts, down to the exact page and paragraph even though he appeared to have been sleeping during much of the entire period. His brain was processing all the information during his "sleep".

Balaji would scribble some brief notes in his characteristic physician's illegible handwriting before he started to write a chapter. Each chapter would focus on what he considered as an important item, person or event that shaped the course of India's history. Each chapter could be read independently and not necessarily sequentially. Each chapter should be no more than five or six pages long.

He wanted to tell the history of India in a simple, clear and uncomplicated manner so that it would also appeal to non-academics and to non-Indians. More importantly, he wanted to write it for the children of the vast Indian diaspora, scattered in many parts of the world, many of whom may be unfamiliar with India's history and many of whom may have never set foot in India.

He tried not to have too many characters in each chapter so as not to confuse the reader. He chose to be concise. He wanted his book to have many images and maps to accompany the text, to make it interesting and easy for the reader. He personally selected the images for the chapters. He also wanted maps for every chapter.

He bought a stack of tracing paper, a set of coloured pens, some pencils and an eraser. He managed to do maps for several chapters before he felt the ill effects of his treatment for colon cancer. Thereafter, despite his talent for being able to read and write fast, he had only time and energy for his projects and duties at his ministry, his constituency and the community.

It is therefore with great appreciation and gratitude that this book has materialized, much to the efforts of Ambassador Kesavapany, Director of Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, who offered to have ISEAS publish the book, Mrs Triena Ong and Mark Tallara of ISEAS Publishing, who have painstakingly gone through every word in every chapter, sourced for the references for the images, prepared the maps, and collaborated with the designer on the layout and design of the book.

We are greatly indebted, too, to President S R Nathan for writing the Foreword as well as to Professor Sugata Bose for his message. We would also like to thank all of Balaji's friends and colleagues who have contributed their endorsements for the book.

Finally I would like to thank our children, Dharma and Anita, who are now old enough to provide me with guidance and advice, for their love and support, as well as all family members, friends, colleagues, grassroots and community leaders and well-wishers who have helped and supported us in one way or another.

**MA SWAN HOO**  
(Mrs Balaji Sadasivan)



# Preface

I am a child of the diaspora, stepping foot on Indian soil for the first time at the age of 35. In some ways I see India like a detached outsider. I had intended to write a history of India for Diaspora Indians so that we could understand the origins of our Indian Heritage even if we did not live in India. This was meant to be a retirement project for which I collected notes.

I divided the history of India into five periods:

One : The ancient period up to 1200;

Two : 1200-1660, when foreign Muslims ruled much of India;

Three : 1660-1860, when Muslim power declined and the British gained power. This period ends with the first signs of Indian Nationalism emerging during the Indian Mutiny;

Four : 1860-1947, when India took the road to independence;

Five : 1947- present, which covers the post independence period.

Unexpected circumstances led me to publish the first two volumes based on my notes much earlier than I had intended to.

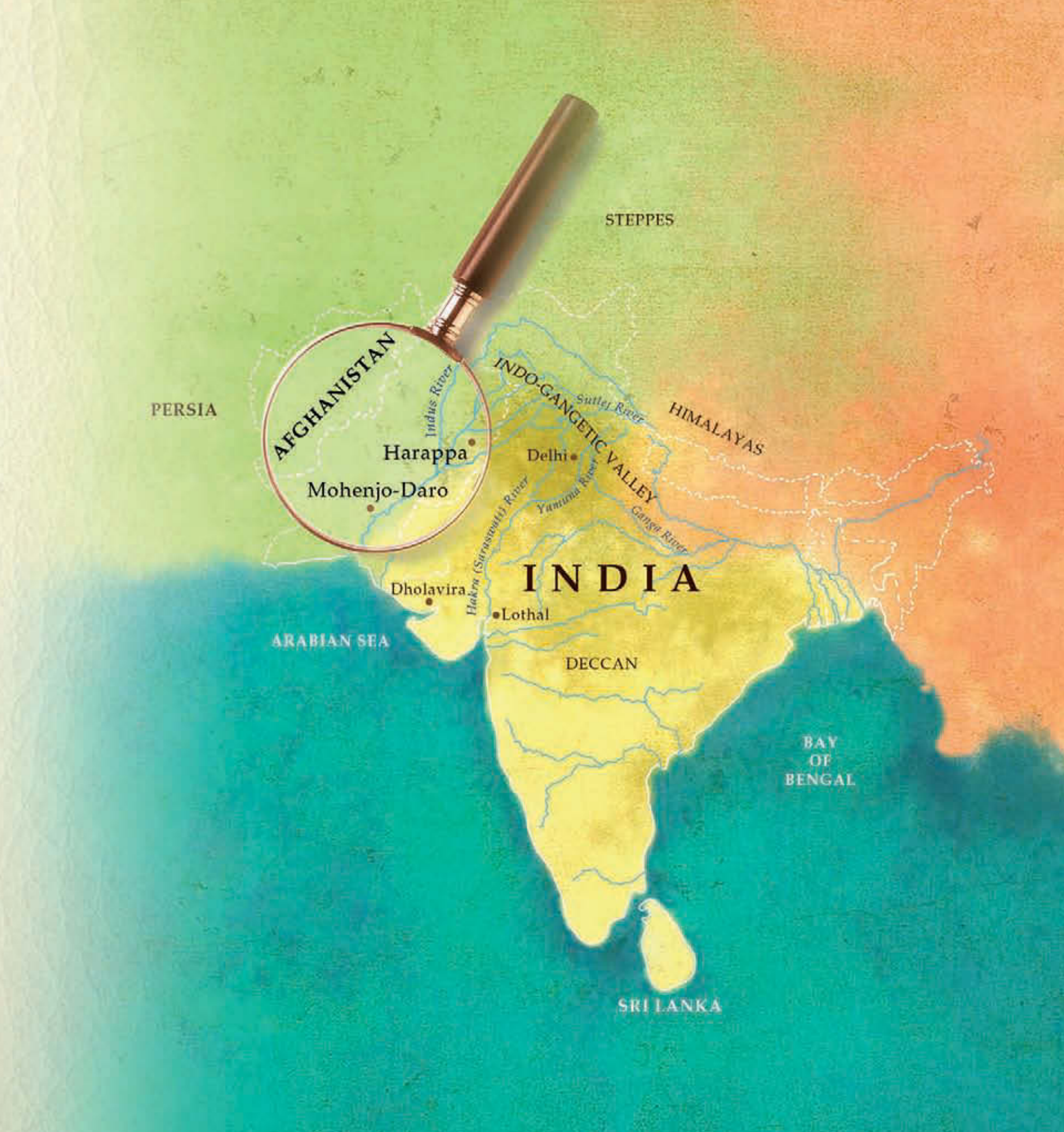




*Chapter 1*  
**The Dancing Girl**



The bronze statuette  
of the dancing girl



PERSIA

STEPPE



AFGHANISTAN

Harappa

Mohenjo-Daro

Indus River

INDO-GANGETIC VALLEY

Sutlej River

HIMALAYAS

Delhi

Hakra (Saraswati) River

Yamuna River

Ganges River

INDIA

Dholavira

Lothal

DECCAN

ARABIAN SEA

BAY OF BENGAL

SRI LANKA

# 2500 BCE Mohenjo-Daro

The people of the  
Indus Valley Civilization  
enter the Bronze Age

The ruins of Mohenjo-Daro



**In the very first gallery** on the ground floor of the National Museum in New Delhi, a small bronze statuette of a naked girl in what appears to be a dancing pose is displayed in a glass showcase. It was cast around 2500 BCE. Over thousands of years, humans living in the Stone Age made improvements to their stone implements and weapons. They may have discovered copper, silver, tin or gold but these metals in their pure state are soft and could not replace stone tools. The mixing of tin and copper to create the alloy, bronze, which is stronger than its individual components and stronger than stone, was the technological breakthrough that distinguished the Bronze Age. Bronze created new possibilities for human society and lifted civilization a notch upwards.

The statuette indicates that a Bronze Age Civilization existed in India 4,500 years ago, possibly the most advanced human civilization in the world of that ancient time. This is a forgotten period of Indian history which was only recently discovered. India in its subsequent history would have periods of achievement but it would not have the distinction of being the most advanced society in the world again.

The remains of the earliest *Homo sapiens* in South Asia were found in Sri Lanka and they date back to 34,000 years ago. While peninsular India has yielded numerous stone artefacts from the Old Stone Age (Palaeolithic Period), no such artefacts have been found in the Indo-Gangetic Valley possibly because this area was an uninhabitable marshland in those early days. As marshland became fertile riverine valleys, *Homo sapiens* descended from the Deccan to the Indo-Gangetic Valley. The life of the Palaeolithic Man was barely distinguishable from that of other animals. They lived as packs of hunter food-gatherers. With improvement in their ability to fashion stone, new tools like sharp stone arrowheads and knives were created, heralding the Middle Stone Age (Mesolithic Period).

Around 8000 BCE, in several regions around the world, as the Ice Age receded, human society entered the New Stone

Age (Neolithic Period). The hallmark of the Neolithic Man was the domestication of plants. The advent of agriculture marks the origin of civilization. A stable food supply allowed an expansion of human population, a division of labour and a surplus of human energy that could be diverted from the primeval struggle to survive, to the cultural and social activities that we associate with civilization.

Five thousand years ago, Neolithic Man inhabited the six continents, but only in three regions is there clear evidence of settled societies with rudimentary towns that could be categorized as civilization – Sumer (Iraq), Egypt, and the Indus Valley. Until recently Chinese civilization was thought to have started a thousand years later with the Shang dynasty. Now there is some evidence of earlier Chinese settled societies during the Xia dynasty which pre-dates the Shang. Neolithic man must have discovered that in certain locations, to form settled societies, it was possible to repeatedly cultivate crops that could serve as a storable source of food. There are two pre-requisites for the repeated cultivation of land, year after year—a reliable source of water and fertile soil. This was found along the valleys of large rivers where the river periodically flooded the land. The river provided water and the periodic flooding of the land with deposition of new silt ensured the continued fertility of the land. The land along the Nile, the Euphrates, and the Indus met these requirements and hence the earliest civilizations had their origins along the banks of these rivers.

Progress of the early civilizations was accelerated by the development of writing – hieroglyphics in Egypt, cuneiform in Sumer, and the Indus Valley script in India. With writing, human society had the means to accumulate knowledge and information beyond what could be committed to human memory.

Egypt and Sumer built their cities with mud and these have long been washed away leaving behind gold artefacts and stone edifices as reminders of their civilization. The Indus Valley cities are bereft of monumental edifices but the

remains of their well planned cities built with baked brick are themselves a monument to the advanced urbanization of their civilization.

The earliest reference to the lost Indus Valley Civilization comes from Greece. Strabo, a Greek historian stated that one of Alexander's generals described crossing a land with a thousand deserted cities during their journey down the Indus Valley. Two thousand years after Alexander, in 1826, a British Army deserter who went under the name of Charles Masson came across Harappa while travelling through the Punjab region. He described a "ruinous brick castle" and remnants of ancient buildings. However, British engineers pillaged much of the brick for the construction of the Lahore-Multan railway and so when excavations of the vandalized ruins of Harappa were carried out in the 1870s, there were no significant finds at the site, except for a soapstone seal engraved with the image of a bull and six characters of an unknown script. The seal at the time of its discovery was considered to be of no great significance.

It was the fortuitous discovery of Mohenjo-Daro by R. D. Banerjee in 1919 that led to our current day knowledge of this civilization. While scouting the arid lands 350 miles



Soapstone seal from Harappa

south of Harappa, Banerjee discovered a Buddhist stupa at a place that was called Mohenjo-Daro, which means "mould of the dead" in the local dialect. Around the stupa were the remains of an ancient city. A preliminary dig uncovered bits of engraved copper and three more soapstone seals. This sparked the great excitement that led to massive excavation works in 1926.

The dancing girl was found at Mohenjo-Daro. The dancing girl was cast using the lost wax process. The creator of the statuette was a skilled metallurgist who first carved a model in wax. The model was then covered with wet clay which hardened as it dried. Holes were bored into the clay mould. When the mould was heated, the wax flowed out creating a hollow space into which was poured a mixture of molten copper and tin.

The blacksmiths of the Indus Valley were the first to discover the secret of casting bronze. Copper smelting may have been accidentally discovered during the production of bricks in the kilns when copper containing ores like malachite were heated. While copper ore was readily available in the Indus Valley region, the source of the tin ore is a mystery and it had to be imported, which means that trade and contact with other lands existed even in those ancient days. Since Indus Valley seals have been found in Mesopotamia, a region where tin ore is found, there is speculation that trade between the two civilizations flourished.

Who is the person represented by the dancing girl – was she a priestess or a courtesan? Some archaeologists have tried to divine her racial type by her face. Besides the dancing girl, a soapstone bust of a bearded man with a headband and an armband was also recovered at Mohenjo-Daro. Historians speculate that the figure represents a chief priest.

While the culture and the people of the Indus Valley are subject to speculation that more often than not, reflect the prejudices and biases of the speculating historian or archaeologist, the vast extent of the Indus Valley Civilization is beyond speculation. It was spread over a thousand miles, from the foothills of the Himalayas in the North to the

Arabian Sea in the South. The area exceeded a million square kilometres. Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa are best known because they were the earliest to be discovered. The excavation of more recently discovered sites like Dholavira and Lothal are adding to our knowledge of this civilization. There is no doubt that more sites will be discovered and that the ongoing work of archaeologists has only just scratched the surface.

The common features found in the cities that have been excavated indicate a unified culture with interaction among the populace between cities. The cities were planned on a grid pattern with broad streets, a clean water supply, and a planned sanitation and drainage system. Among the ancient civilizations, the Indus Valley cities are unique in their advanced state of town planning. Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, Dholavira and Lothal each had between 20,000 to 50,000 inhabitants. Some cities, like Mohenjo-Daro, were successively destroyed and rebuilt several times. Flooding is thought to have periodically caused the destruction of this city.

The Indus Valley cities were built using standardized baked bricks with the ratio of their dimensions set at 1:2:4. Individual house drains were linked to the sewer system along the streets. The sanitary drainage was superior to that found in sixteenth century London. Houses generally had a courtyard with rooms opening into it. Most houses had individual wells and bathrooms with drainage. Organized urban living of this nature would have required a high degree of control but we have no knowledge of the politico-social organization of this society. Perhaps when the Indus Valley script is deciphered and we are able to read the more than 4,000 inscriptions unearthed, we may glean an understanding of their society.

Both Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, which are located in present-day Pakistan, had citadels in the western part of the city with defensive walls and bastions. The function of the large public areas and halls within the citadel is not known. There are bitumen-lined brick reservoirs which could have served as baths or as water storage tanks. Historians have



Soapstone bust of High Priest

commented that unlike other ancient civilizations, there are no large spectacular temple structures or monumental tombs in the Indus Valley cities. Perhaps this is the best monument that the Indus Valley Civilization leaves posterity with its planned cities which indicate a culture where the energy of the inhabitants was channelled towards the betterment of life for the multitude and where massive temples to appease the gods or cavernous tombs to memorialize a few do not appear to have been priorities.

Dholavira is located on an island in the Kutch region of Gujarat which is surrounded by water only during the monsoon period. Although its city planning with a citadel and residential area is reminiscent of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, the buildings were built with stone and not bricks.

Lothal, also in Gujarat, was a trading port with a dockyard and a wharf. Boats from Lothal would have been able to travel to Oman and Mesopotamia. Sumerian texts of the second millennium BCE refer to trade with a region in the East, Meluhha, which some historians now identify as the Indus Valley Civilization.

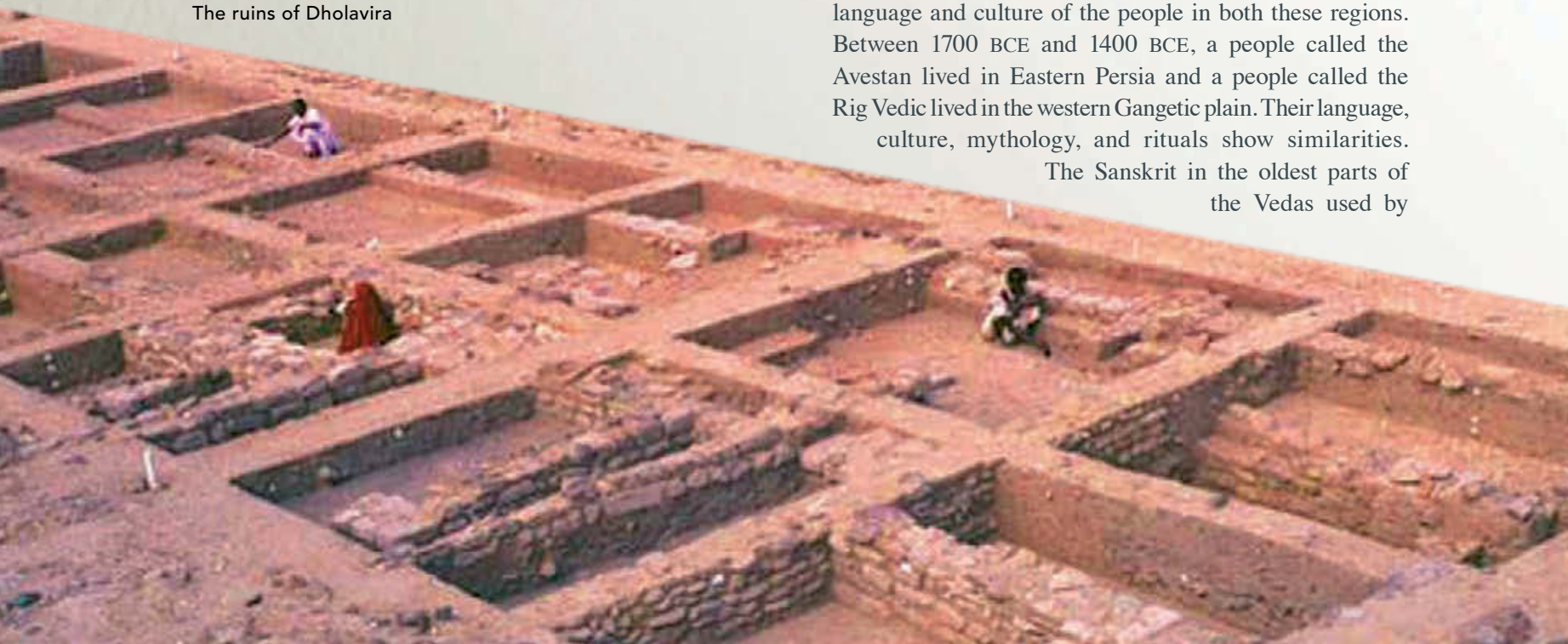
The Indus Valley cities were built around 2600 BCE and were abandoned around 1700 BCE. The Vedic civilization of the Gangetic Valley emerged several hundred years later. Why and how did the Indus Valley Civilization disappear? We can look to nature for an explanation. A stable food supply is a prerequisite for urban civilized life. Any natural event that caused severe famine over the entire Indus Valley region for a significant period of time would have depopulated the cities. The survivors would leave the region to areas far enough to be unaffected by the famine. The disintegration of their society and the painful memories of the suffering that led to their departure would have been strong reasons for the survivors not to return. The cause for the prolonged famine could have been extensive flooding, drought, climatic change, earthquakes or a combination of these changes.

The ruins of Dholavira

There is evidence of a major geological change in the Indus Valley region between 1800 BCE and 1500 BCE. While there are fewer than a hundred Indus Valley sites along the Indus and its tributaries, there are more than six times this number along the Hakra River and its tributaries which suggests that the focal centre of the Indus Valley Civilization was not the Indus River but the dried out river bed of the Hakra. Satellite photography suggests that at least until 2000 BCE, the upper Sutlej River and the Yamuna flowed into the Hakra and ended in the Arabian Sea at the Kutch. A major catastrophic tectonic shift must have occurred to divert the Sutlej to the Indus and the Yamuna to the Ganges, drying up the Hakra River. The earthquakes that led to the diversion of the two rivers would have been of a massive magnitude causing extensive destruction to all the cities. The drying up of the Hakra River would have disrupted food production. The flooding of the Indus Valley due to the added waters of Sutlej to the Indus would have caused further destruction to cities and more disruption of food production.

The survivors of this catastrophe that destroyed the Indus Valley Civilization would have moved to adjacent areas, to Persia and Afghanistan in the West and to the Gangetic Plain and the Deccan in the East. They would have influenced the language and culture of the people in both these regions. Between 1700 BCE and 1400 BCE, a people called the Avestan lived in Eastern Persia and a people called the Rig Vedic lived in the western Gangetic plain. Their language, culture, mythology, and rituals show similarities.

The Sanskrit in the oldest parts of the Vedas used by



the Rig Vedics and the earliest hymns of the *Avesta*, which are part of the sacred text of the Zoroastrians (Parsees) resemble each other in both language and content. They were both composed between 2000 BCE and 1500 BCE, a time frame that overlaps with that of the Indus Valley Civilization. Both Avestans and the Rig Vedics used fire in their rituals and drank a juice called the soma in the *Rig Veda* and hoama in the Avesta. Both groups referred to themselves as Arya. The Indus Valley Civilization could be the origin of the similarities of the two people.

The linguistic links between the languages of Europe and India were studied by European scholars in the nineteenth century. They discovered that the *Rig Veda* was very ancient and that the language it was written in, Sanskrit, was sophisticated with a highly developed grammar. They also noticed some similarities between Sanskrit and the European languages. As Christians, they subscribed to the nineteenth century Christian belief that God created the world around 4000 BCE and that Noah's flood occurred around 2500 BCE. As colonialists, they had contempt for Indians and their culture and could not believe that Indians could be responsible for the composition of the Vedas. These scholars developed the theory that Aryans, a European race, were responsible for the philosophy of the Vedas. They claimed that the Aryans entered India around 2000 BCE and introduced agriculture and civilization to India.

The European Aryan culture was supposed to have originated from the Steppes although there was no archaeological evidence for any such sophisticated civilization in that region. The British Raj in India readily promoted the idea of a racially superior white skinned Aryan invasion and a caste system based on the whiteness of one's skin colour as this aligned their Imperial power to the existing caste hierarchy with the Englishman at the top of the pyramid. When the Indus Valley Civilization was discovered and its existence corresponded to the time when the *Rig Veda* was composed, European scholars explained away its importance by proposing that the superior Aryan race destroyed the Indus Valley Civilization.



Sanitary drains in Mohenjo-Daro

The European incarnate of nineteenth century Aryan pseudo-science with its idealized blue-eyed, blond-haired German received ideological acclamation in Nazi Germany. The catastrophic destruction of Europe in World War II exposed the racism behind European Aryanism, but the Indian version of this ideology continued to thrive in India even after Independence. Under British rule, high caste Hindus supported the Aryan theory as it appeared to justify the caste system and their position within the system. While Europe gave up the Aryan theory after World War II, the cohort of British trained historians continued to perpetuate the Aryan theory in post Independence India.

Today, genomics has been used to track the migration of the human race. Studies of the mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) show that humans originated from Africa and reached Southwest Asia around 50,000 years ago. There was then a divergence, with some humans moving on to India and others to Europe. There is no mtDNA evidence of migration of Europeans to India around 2000 BCE as asserted by the Aryan theory. Studies of the mtDNA of Indians show a fundamental unity of their mtDNA lineages despite the cultural and linguistic diversity within the Indian subcontinent. The mtDNA studies show that there is no





such thing as a Hindu or Muslim, high caste or low caste, North Indian or South Indian genetic identity. All ethnic Indians share a common genomic unity that separates them from Europeans.

Invading armies leave a genetic record of their semen as they travel across the land. Armies consisting of Persians, Greeks, Parthians, Kushans, Huns, Tibetans, Arabs, Afghans, Central Asians and Turks have invaded India. Their Y chromosome can be found among all Indian ethnic groups, with a greater frequency in the North and among higher castes. So while all ethnic Indians share a common genomic unity, there is no such thing as a racially pure Indian.

If the Aryan mentioned in the *Rig Veda* are not Europeans, where do they come from? The *Rig Veda* mentions the Saraswati River 72 times. In the Vedas, it is the chief river in a land with seven major rivers. Its description corresponds to the now dried up Hakra River, the centre of the Indus Valley Civilization. If this is indeed true, then the origins of Indian philosophy as expounded in the Vedas are indigenous and there is a cultural continuity between the Indus Valley Civilization and the subsequent Vedic culture of the Gangetic plain.

Early urban civilizations were fragile ecosystems and nature in its whimsical way must have snuffed out several. Looking back five thousand years, we trace our history to known civilizations. These are the survivors of the Darwinian world we live in. Those that did not survive became ancient “lost” civilizations. The Bronze Sanxingdui Civilization in China and the Mayan Civilization in Mexico are examples of lost civilizations. The Indus Valley Civilization falls into the same category although its scale and extent are extraordinary. Perhaps, the most important lesson that the Indus Valley Civilization can teach us is the precariousness of the ecological balance between man and nature.

Artist's impression of Lothal



## Chapter 2

# The Vedic Age



Krishna and Arjuna