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**D.N. Jha. Ancient India in Historical Outline. 3rd Ed.
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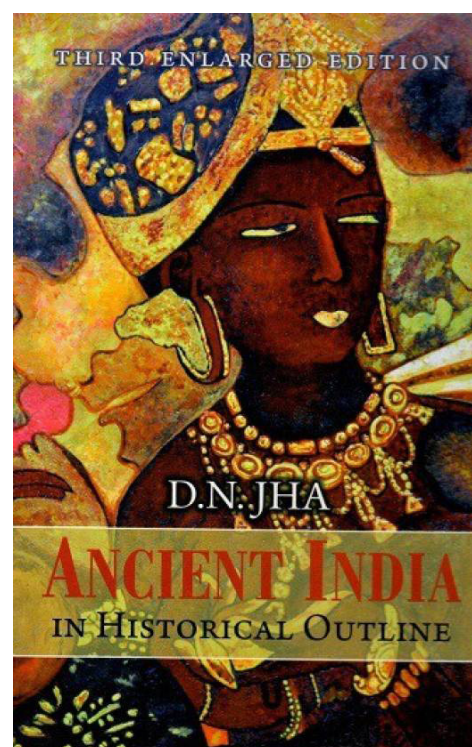
Ancient India was one of the great four original Eurasian centres of civilisation, birthplace of three world religions and had a long and fruitful connection with the Near East. Beginning with the trading connections arising between the Early Dynastic Sumerian city-states and the Harappan Civilisation along the Indus River in the mid-to-late 3rd Millennium B.C. to the international contacts between the Gupta Empire and the rest of Eurasia, India was a longstanding presence in the Ancient World. However, despite the culturally rich and politically dynamic civilisations which arose in Ancient India, it is frequently only mentioned in passing, or in reference to Alexander the Great. A gap such as this in Near Eastern studies makes works like the one under review exceedingly helpful in introducing students in Ancient History or World History courses to a complex and dynamic civilisation.

D. N. Jha is former Professor of History at the University of New Delhi, and is the author of *Revenue System in Post-Mauryan and Gupta Times*, *Economy and Society in Early India*, *The Myth of the Holy Cow*, *Early India*, *Rethinking Hindu Identity*, and *Against the Grain: Notes on Identity, Intolerance and History*.¹ He is also the editor of several works, most recently two volumes of essays in honour of the late R. S. Sharma.² *Ancient India in Historical Outline* was originally published in 1977. It was then revised and re-written for a second edition in 1998, which would be reprinted nineteen times. With this third edition Jha has made some minor emendations and added an epilogue focusing “on the contact of ancient India with the outside world, and on those developments which influence our life and thought in modern times.”³ Aiming this work at the general reader, and presumably undergraduate students, Jha takes a chronological approach to the history of Ancient India. He divides his work into eight chapters: *Introduction*, *From Prehistory to the Harappan Civilization*, *The Aryans and the Vedic Life*, *The Material Background of Religious Dissent: Janism and Buddhism*, *The First Territorial States*, *The First Empire*, *Invasions, Trade and Culture c. 200 BC-AD 300*, and *The Myth of the Golden Age*. An extensive epilogue follows these chapters, looking at India’s cultural contacts with the outside world, and the long-term legacy of Ancient India. Rounding out the book are a twenty page annotated bibliography and the index.

In *Chapter 1: Introduction* Jha sets out to provide a compact, yet informative, look at the growth of modern historiography in India. Beginning with the early European contacts during the later period of the Mughul Empire Jha traces the evolution of historical approaches to Indian history. He emphasises that the foundations of Indology laid by the officers of the East India Company as they sought to understand and gain familiarity with the history, laws, and customs of India. Their efforts, and the translations of

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¹ JHA 1967; JHA 1993; JHA 2002; JHA 2004, JHA 2009 & JHA 2018.

² *The Complex Heritage of Early India: Essays in Memory of R.S. Sharma* and *The Evolution of a Nation Pre-colonial to Post-colonial: Essays in Memory of R.S. Sharma*.

³ JHA 2015 11.

Indian writings they began, would give rise to the study of Ancient India at European universities. While Orientalists thought highly, if inaccurately, of India, this view would increasingly come to be displaced by the Utilitarian/Christian missionary intellectual establishment in Europe. This establishment saw India in a highly critical light, and their interpretation of Indian history would dominate scholarship for nearly a century. John Mills work *History of India* would be the dominant introductory work to India for decades, and required reading for British officers and administrators headed to India. Mills work characterised India as 'barbarous and anti-rational' and its society as one that was stagnant and unchanging. It is this view that would permeate into the works of the British administrator/historians of the late 19th and early 20th century. Jha emphasises that these British historians frequently wrote with a view of justifying British rule in India. However, in the early 20th century this historiographical interpretation would come to be challenged by Indian reformers and nationalists, ultimately leading this wave of scholarship to become highly anti-imperialistic. Seeking to refute the image of Ancient India constructed by the British historians, and build a national self-respect, Indian Nationalist historians came to regard the period as an era of prosperity and contentment. At the same time they also began to make aspects of ancient Indian political thought and practise equate to the modern legislation and reforms of the European states. With this also came a glorification by some historians of a "Hindu India," in which the composite character of Indian culture, or the fact that a large number of major dynasties were not of Hindu religious avocation, were ignored in favour of a mythical idealised view of India. The final strand of historiographic tradition involves the debate over periodisation and expansion of history to include greater attention to socio-economic and cultural factors linked with political change. Jha holds the late D. D. Kosambi's two books on Ancient India, with their sophisticated adaptation of Marxist historical interpretation, to be some of the most influential work on this historiographic trend. Holding to the periodisation established by Kosambi, Jha puts the boundary between Ancient and Mediaeval India at the end of the 6th century, not AD 1200 as has been in the past.

With *Chapter 2: From Prehistory to the Harappan Civilisation* Jha begins his inquiry into Ancient India, launching into a quick overview of the Palaeolithic and Chalcolithic settlements in India. Using archaeological evidence Jha provides a snapshot view of settlement and society during these periods, in which the major innovation would be the beginnings of metalworking (originally just copper) to make tools. These Chalcolithic settlements were primarily rural in nature, held domesticated animals, and had begun cultivating cereal crops. Jha emphasises that Chalcolithic settlements in India have an extremely long chronological timespan that in some cases overlays or post-dates the more technologically advanced Harappan civilisation. From here, Jha shifts towards greater detail as he discusses the Indus River or Harappan civilisation. He notes that while more than 2,000 seals have been found bearing Harappan script on them, the script itself has not been successfully deciphered yet.⁴ This leaves our understanding and interpretation of the

⁴ Though this has not stopped numerous books from being published

Harappan civilisation to be based on the material remains found at the numerous archaeological sites. Technologically advanced the Harappans practised bronze metalworking, textile manufacture, brick manufacturing (used to make the massive brick structures that characterise Harappan cities), and wheel-turned mass-produced pottery. Harappans appear to have used some form of irrigation to water their crops due to the large-scale nature of agricultural production. While agricultural production varied at the different Harappan sites, types of peas, varieties of wheat and barley, and other crops have been found. The Harappans also processed extensive trade networks throughout southwest Asia, from which they procured the raw materials needed for producing finished goods. In addition to their contacts with South India, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, land and sea routes connected the Harappans with the city-states of Mesopotamia in the Early Dynastic and Akkadian periods.⁵ Here, references in Sumerian & Akkadian literature to ships from Meleha are linked to Harappan India, while Harappan seals and artefacts have been found at several Mesopotamian sites. At this point, Jha turns to the puzzling question of the decline and fall of the Harappan civilisation. He notes that the consensus is that decline seems to have set in by about 2000BC, when urban settlements began to shrink and decay, while the cities themselves appear to be completely deserted by 1800BC. Reasons for the Harappan collapse include large-scale changes in the courses of the Indus and its tributary rivers, catastrophic flooding leading to population pressures on the cities, irridisation of agricultural lands, and possibly military confrontation with 'barbarian tribes.'

Chapter 3: The Aryans and the Vedic Life

After briefly looking at the main sources for the Vedic period, the Vedas, Jha moves to a discussion of the initial Indo-Aryan settlement. Far from being an instantaneous massive invasion of India the settlement was a long, slow process, taking several centuries. Initial settlements were founded in eastern Afghanistan, the Panjab, and the western Uttar Pradesh, otherwise known as the land of the seven rivers. Only in the Later Vedic period (1000-600BC) did settlement and conquest extended into the Gangetic river valley. Frequently Indo-Aryans found their occupation contested by the indigenous inhabitants of India. For these natives the arrival and conquest by the Indo-Aryans meant a reversion to a more primitive way of life. Far from being an advanced civilisation, the Indo-Aryans were semi-nomadic pastoralists whose only technological innovations were the chariot and bronze technology, and were known for their destruction of towns and cities. Originally the Vedic peoples were cattle raisers who practised a mixed pastoral and agricultural economy. Jha notes that while cattle formed the basis of wealth for the Vedic peoples, they were not yet considered sacred and were regularly sacrificed or used as food. Vedic political and administrative traditions were quite limited. Kingship appears to have mostly been equal to a tribal chieftainship, while tribal assemblies acted as a check on their power. Initially society in the period structured itself around a three-way division into warriors (*Kshatriya*),

claiming to have deciphered the script.

⁵ For a concise introduction to 3rd millennia Sumer & Akkad see ARNOLD 2004, 17-33.

priests (*Brahmana*), and commoners (*Vaishya*). As Vedic conquests expanded into Northern India a fourth class, the *Shudras*, appears to have emerged from the conquered tribes incorporated. These social divisions would later be given religious sanction, laying the foundation for the practise of *Varna* or caste distinctions. While the initial Vedic settlements were in the Indus river valley, by the later Vedic period (1000-600BC) their population was pushing into the Ganges river valley, as indicated by finds of 'Painted Grey-ware pottery' throughout the region. With the shift east the Vedic economy began its move from one primarily pastoral, to one primarily agricultural in origin. Agricultural surplus in term prompted an expansion in crafts, technologies, and urbanisation. As Vedic life became more settled the social norms associated with the *Varna* system became more crystallised, strengthening the power of the *Brahmana* and *Kshatriya* classes at the expense of the lower orders.

Chapter 4: Material Background of Religious Dissent

In the first portion of this chapter, Jha examines the expansion of a more complex economy and society in the Later Vedic (1000-600BC) world, positing its growth provided a foundation for Jain and Buddhist religious development. Using archaeological data, Jha stresses that the growth evident in trade, farming, and the expansion of towns caused economic surpluses to develop, allowing for diversification in arts and crafts. At the same time, Jha highlights the fact that the rise of a new wealthy class had long lasting effects on Vedic society, causing a rise in inequalities to develop. These developments also helped to end tribal notions of kinship and reinforce the fourfold division of society. Conflict between Vedic religious practises, with their emphasis on animal sacrifices (particularly cattle), and the new social groups were responsible in part for the emergence of new religious and philosophical ideas during this period. Moving from economics to religion Jha briefly sketches the beginnings of the two major alternative sects to appear out of 6th century India: Jainism and Buddhism. Turning first to the Jains, Jha provides a brief synopsis of Jine Mahavisa's life and the core Jain beliefs. He notes that the concept of God is nearly irrelevant to Jainism. Instead, the sole focus of life is the purification of the soul through fasting, rigorous practise of non-violence, truth etc. Jains were not only forbidden to wage war, but also to farm, something that would lead Jains to become involved in trade and mercantile endeavours. Moving onto Buddhism, Jha again provides a brief synopsis of Siddhartha's life before discussing the *ashtangamarga* or eight-fold path towards achieving salvation, regardless of social origin or birth. From here common features of Jainism and Buddhism are discussed, such as their austerity, opposition to animal sacrifice, and their denial of Vedic authority that that brought both religions into conflict with the *Brahmana* class. Buddhism in particular with its moderate emphasis on *ahimsa* (non-injury of animals) showed awareness of cattle's importance in agricultural cultivation. While neither religion sought to abolish the *Varna* caste system, they adapted a much more liberal attitude towards the lower orders, and certainly did not proscribe their ability to gain knowledge, as the *Brahmana* were wont to do.

Chapter 5: First Territorial States

Jha moves from religious to political developments with this chapter, discussing the growth of the *Majanapadas* (large states) who dominated 6th- 4th century BC India. While Jha notes that even at the end of the Later Vedic period historians can begin to see a shift from tribal organisation to territorial state, this process rapid accelerated after the 6th century BC. While Jha very briefly runs through all sixteen states, his main focus will be on the state of Magadha in the Gangetic basin as it will become the political centre of North India. Last and most important of the Magadhan dynasties were the Nanda, who are sometimes credited with overthrowing all other contemporary royal houses and incorporating them into the Magadhan state. Jha emphasises the favourable geographic and climatic position of Magadha, along with the rich mineral deposits as a key factor in their success. Nanda expansion coincided with Alexander II of Macedon's conquest of the Achaemenid empire and his subsequent campaign into the Indus region of Northwest India. While in the long-term Alexander's conquest reconnected India to external trade routes, in the short-term his invasion destroyed or forced the consolidation of the tribes and small states of the North-West. Ultimately, this power vacuum would be exploited by the first of the Mauryan Emperor's, Chandragupta, when he began building his state. Jha then briefly looks at a curious feature of early Indian statehood, the republics found particularly in the Panjab and Himalayan foothills. Emphasising the corporate nature of these states Jha sees them less as republics, and more as undemocratic oligarchies.

Chapter 6: *The First Empire* is exclusively devoted to the Mauryan Empire, the first and largest of the Indian empires. While Jha provides a sketch overview of the reigns of Chandragupta, Bindusara, and Asoka Maurya, his primary focus is on how the Mauryan state functioned. He emphasises that Mauryan political supremacy was obtained and maintained due to the enormous army, given as 400,000-600,000 in sources, the Mauryan emperors were able to field. Administratively the Mauryan emperors divided their state into a number of provinces carefully regulated at national, provincial, and local levels of government. With the need to support such as large army the Mauryan state became incredibly centralised, taking control of and regulating many of the crafts and industries to make a profit. Jha looks at how the main Indian source for the period, Kautilya, seems to reinforce the image of an all-powerful state, though he cautions that in reality actual control will have varied by region. Also noted is the persistent tension between the Vedic, Jain, and Buddhist sects, a fact Jha sees as a possible reason for Asoka Maurya to promote his policy of *dhamma*. *Dhamma*, from *dharma* in Sanskrit, appears to have been an ethical code to build up a social responsibility in the Mauryan population, including measures relating to social welfare. Asoka inscribed his *Dhamma* principles on several rocks and pillars throughout the Mauryan Empire, often in the local language of the province. In his examination of the decline and fall of the Mauryan Empire Jha puts most of his emphasis on economic reasons for the collapse, rather than military or political reasons.

Chapter 7: *Invasions, Trade and Culture 200BC-AD300* represents the longest chapter of *Ancient India* as

Jha pulls together a number of elements across a broad chronological period. He explores the complicated political history of the period first by looking at the immediate successors to the Maurya, the Shunga, followed briefly by a succession of tribal states. However, the most important political development Jha sees in the period is the repeated movement of people across the Hindu Kush mountains into Northwest India, as it promoted active interaction with the outside world and presented new cultural elements that added 'new dimensions' to Indian culture. First of these movements were the Indo-Greeks, originally based out of Bactria, who overran much of Northwest India in the early 2nd century BC. Followed by the Saka, and the Indo-Parthians, the most important movement was that of the Kushana in the early 1st century AD. Under rulers such as Kadphises and Kanishka the Kushana incorporated not only Northwest India, but most of the Gangetic valley, into a large polity based in Central Asia. At its height, the borders of the Kushan Empire stretched not only from the Arsacid Empire in Iran, but also to the Eastern Han Empire of China. Kushan rulers converted to Buddhism and were responsible for Buddhist missions journeying to Central Asia and China. On the economic side, Jha highlights the thriving trade that existed between Indian and the Western world through overland and seaborne trade routes. He also sees the expanding trade as being connected to the growth of a monetary economy in India, as the archaeological record reveals varying denominations of coinage being used in day-to-day transactions. Following this Jha examines the main religious developments of the Post-Mauryan era. This era saw the definite split of Buddhism into two different strands: the more orthodox *Hirayana* (Lesser Vehicle), and the *Mahayana* (Greater Vehicle) which dominated in India and Central Asia. A hallmark of the *Mahayana* was the evolution of the Buddha from a religious teacher to a mighty spiritual being through the *Bodhisattva* doctrine. Within the Vedic tradition, due to the attacks of Buddhism and Jainism, the period saw the assimilation of several popular cults, leading to several important changes in beliefs. Not the least of these was the emergence of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva as the three principle deities of Brahmanical pantheon. Another innovation was the shift in attitude towards cattle as they went from favourite sacrifice to sacred animal during the Post-Mauryan period.

With *Chapter 8: Myth of the Golden Age* Jha examines the Gupta period of Ancient India, roughly stretching from the 4th – 6th centuries AD. After a very quick sprint through the political history of the Gupta dynasty, Jha begins looking at administration and society of the Gupta Empire. He highlights that, in contrast with the Mauryan Empire, the Gupta did not seem to have a large professional army. Instead, they relied, to a great extent, on the military forces of the feudatory states who were vassals of the Gupta. In addition to a smaller army, the Gupta administration was far less centralised than the Maurya. Indeed, over the lifetime of the empire, administration throughout the Gupta polity began to decentralise as extensive land grants to priests, royal officials, and feudatories transferred portions of Imperial authority with the grants. While slavery as an institution weakened during the Gupta period, serfdom

(binding peasants to their land) emerged and increased. Jha notes that the period also saw a decline in long-distance trade, particularly with the West. In turn this led to a shrinking of the coastal towns, and a reduction in population movement within the Gupta Empire. While urban centres did not disappear altogether, their size and wealth shrunk considerably. The *Varna* caste system seems to have expanded dramatically with a massive increase in *Shudra* and untouchable caste members. Pronounced distinctions in the social/economic treatment of different castes became much more rigid and unyielding. Overall Jha sees the Gupta period as one primarily of decline, and a transition to the primarily feudal period of the 6th – 12th centuries. Jha takes especial aim at Indian historians who see the Gupta period as a sort of *Pax Guptana* of Indian history, a Hindu renaissance. Instead of a renaissance, the Gupta period was one of economic decline, social stratification, and political decentralisation.

The *Epilogue* represents what is essentially an all-new chapter for the book. Here Jha explores first the cultural contacts between both West and East Asia. While discussing the impact of the Achaemenids, Alexander, and the wide-ranging contacts during the Mauryan Empire, most of his coverage is reserved for the Kushana. Jha effectively emphasises the two-way cultural contacts between India and the Kushana, particularly their role in transmitting Buddhism to Central Asia and China. The bulk of the epilogue is concerned with the legacy of Ancient India. Taking a thematic approach Jha looks at a wide range of cultural, religious, technological, and philosophical contributions made to Indian society during the Ancient period. In particular, Jha's discussion of the Philosophical, and the Mathematics & Science contributions of Ancient India are lucid and concise syntheses.

Ancient India is a compact work, and given the chronological span of time covered it is natural that there would be areas that could have received greater coverage. In particular, the following are a few points the review wishes Jha devoted greater coverage. In *Chapter 1* while Jha provides an excellent introduction to roots of Indology, and the historiographical roots of the British administrator/historians of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, his discussion falters ironically with the emergence of a Marxist interpretation of Indian history. While D.D. Kosambi was indeed the pioneer of Indian Marxist interpretation of Ancient India, Jha overlooks that long influence and impact of fellow Marxist R.S. Sharma (Ram Saran Sharma). Sharma's work, frequently updated and revised based upon new research, spans a fifty-year period, and he had a great impact on younger scholars. In his coverage of the Harappan Civilisation in *Chapter 2* Jha only obliquely references the controversy over some Hindu revivalist historians attempting to set the centre of Harappan civilisation on the elusive Sarasvati river, which just so happens to be located in India not Pakistan. Assertions that the Harappan civilisation was in fact Indo-Aryan have also been made, attempting to make Vedic civilisation native to India, provides an additional element to this controversy that Jha does not discuss. In *Chapter 4* the reviewer wishes that Jha had spent greater space discussing the religious beliefs of Jainism and Buddhism, since as they stand the discussion is rather

sketchy and incomplete. While Jha provides some brief coverage of the Ancient Indian republics in *Chapter 5*, greater discussion of these non-monarchical governments would have been appreciated rather than simple denunciations that they were not democratic republics. While Jha does not in the introduction that he is not primarily concerned with political history, the coverage of political events in *Chapters 6- 8* is extremely perfunctory and does not truly provide enough context for the administrative and economic analysis that follows. While ten-fold-out maps have been provided, the towns and regions referenced in the particular chapter the map is located frequently do not correspond with those shown on the map. Additionally, the inclusion of modern-day national boundaries is particularly unhelpful, a several of the maps appear to be somewhat crude redrawing of maps from *An Historical Atlas of the Indian Peninsula*, and the map on Trade routes is effectively unreadable due to the level of detail.⁶ The largest problem though with *Ancient India* is the fact that this 3rd edition is essentially the 2nd edition with a new epilogue. Any emendations Jha made are minor, leaving the text practically unaltered from the 1998 publication and a bibliography that has not been updated. This is particularly frustrating because Jha revised substantial parts of these chapters for publication in *Early India: A Concise History* in 2004.⁷ While this does not mean the *Ancient India* cannot be read with profit, it does mean that its utility has been superseded by newer publications that came out after the 2nd edition in 1998. In particular, R.S. Sharma's *India's Ancient Past* covers much the same period, but in greater detail and in some places greater clarity.

On the whole, this is a good introduction to ancient Indian history. Inexpensive, well-bound, and quite readable it would provide a good supplement to an Ancient History or World History course. However, the decision to not update the text from the 2nd edition is disappointing and reduces the utility of the book. Recommended with qualifications.

APPENDIX I: ADDITIONAL WORKS ON ANCIENT INDIA

The following is a short selective list of works published since 1998 that provide an introduction to all, or specific periods, of Ancient India.

P. N. Chopra, B. N. Puri, M.N. Das, A. C. Pradhan. *A Comprehensive History of Ancient India*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 2003. Well written, clearly laid out textbook.

A People's History of India – General Editor: Irfan Habib. Important new ongoing series that looks to cover the entirety of Indian history. These volumes are clear, concise, and perfect introduction to specific periods for undergraduate students.

Irfan Habib. *Prehistory*. 9th Ed. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012.

Irfan Habib. *The Indus Civilization*. 9th Ed. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2015.

Irfan Habib & Vijay Kumar Thakur. *The Vedic Age*. 8th Ed. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2016.

⁶ COLLIN DAVIES 1959.

⁷ JHA 2004. This publication extended *Ancient India's* coverage to look at the early feudal period up to AD1200.

Krishna Mohan Shrimali. *The Age of Iron and the Religious Revolution*. 6th Ed. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2016.

Irfan Habib & Vivekanand Jha. *Mauryan India*. 7th Ed. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2015.

Irfan Habib. *Post-Mauryan India 200BC-AD300*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012.

Bhairabi Prasad Sahu & Kesavan Veluthat. *Society and Culture in Post-Mauryan India c. 200BC-AD300*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2015.

A.K. Majumdar. *A Concise History of Ancient India*. 3 Volumes. 2nd Ed. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1992. Though not published after 1998, Majumdar's work is a frequently overlooked and extremely comprehensive work, divided into three volumes on history, administration & economic life, and Hinduism.

J.L. Mehta & Sarita Mehta. *History of Ancient India (From the Earliest Times to 1206 AD)*. New Delhi: Lotus Press, 2013. Though not based on the most recent scholarship, this book is a lucid, balanced interpretation of the past that provides ample coverage to social and economic history, as well as political.

R.S. Sharma. *Rethinking India's Past*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009. A thematic approach to specific concepts, models, or frameworks used in interpreting Ancient India.

R.S. Sharma. *India's Ancient Past*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005. A chronological synthesis of Ancient Indian history by one of the great Indian historians of the late 20th century. Readable, concise and well laid out Sharma provides the best concise introduction to Ancient India.

Romilia Thapar. *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2002. The second edition of a work originally published in 1961. Thapar shortened the chronological span of the book, while expanding and rewriting the entirety. An important work.

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JHA 2004

Jha, D.N. *Early India: A Concise History*. (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers.)

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Jha, D.N. *The Myth of the Holy Cow*. (London: Verso)

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