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Words for things

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Andrew Robinson
INDIA
A short history
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" The English make a habit of writing history", Gandhi wrote in *Hindu Swaraj*. "They pretend to study the manners and customs of all peoples . . . . They write about their researches in the most laudatory terms and hypnotise us into believing them. We, in our ignorance, then fall at their feet." This was written in 1908, when colonial scholarship still held sway. Gandhi himself failed to redress the situation, although Nehru put his prison years to good use with the publication in 1946 of his influential *Discovery of India*. Independence then spawned a school of nationalist historians, whose ambitious productions were upstaged by incisive studies from Marxist-inclined scholars such as D. D. Kosambi, Irfan Habib and Romila Thapar. By the 1960s, the hypnotic spell of British scholarship looked to have been broken. Indians were finally taking control of their past.

Yet since then, surprisingly little. The most interesting work on Indian history now comes from the United States, while *pace* Ramachandra Guha, the best general histories are by German and British authors. Andrew Robinson belongs among the latter. In his pithy, admirable *India: A short history* he too notes the recent decline in intellectual creativity but focuses more on scientific research and the cinema than the humanities. His standards are high. As a biographer of Rabindranath Tagore, Albert Einstein and Satyajit Ray, he looks for towering personalities. Finding none, he lays the blame on the bureaucrats' stranglehold over the universities and research institutes, the seductive appeal of Bollywood's productions and "the deadening effect of caste politics". Of these, the last may be the most questionable. Caste certainly dictates voting patterns, but its influence was even more baleful before universal suffrage. The mathematician Srinavasa Ramanujan nevertheless achieved international acclaim as early as 1918. So did Tagore and then Ray who, as well-connected brahmins, could only benefit from the caste hierarchy. Far from being enemies of achievement, today's more assertive castes could prove to be allies of excellence.

Robinson is at his best when dealing with India's earlier history. Compressing 4,000 years into 200 pages proves a tall order and leads him to reserve nearly half the book for the BC(E) millennia. But he here picks his way with assurance and insight. Chapters on the Harappan (or Indus Valley) civilization and on that of the *Veda*-composing *arya* offer useful updates of the latest research, along with some lively swipes at the reactionary nationalists who would distort this research. Sadly what he calls "the paucity of evidence and excess of speculative interpretation" is unlikely to clear the air. The Harappan script is as far from being deciphered as ever, and the origins of *arya* remain shrouded in myth. The antiquity of these civilizations (roughly 3000–1000 BC) is not in dispute; but with the Harappan world devoid of documentation ("things without words" in Wendy Doniger's phrasing) and the Vedic world devoid of objects ("words without things"), they have yet to be reconciled with one another; and both fall well short of our understanding of contemporary civilizations in Egypt, Iraq and China.

Buddhism brings some enlightenment. Words and things at last betray the same provenance and philologists and archaeologists find common ground. Inscriptions validate the later *jataka* (birth stories of the Buddha) and both are substantiated by statuary and stupas. The chronology is still contentious; the Enlightened One may have lived in either

the fifth or fourth century BC. But at least he lived; and from what he renounced, what he taught and where he travelled, much can be learned. Evidently the Gangetic basin was already divided into proto-kingdoms and republics; there was an urban life of sorts, frequent warfare and some trade. The ingredients of history were accumulating. Robinson quotes Tagore in calling the Buddha "the greatest man ever born on this earth" and doubtless could have quoted Ray in similar vein on the Emperor Ashoka. Instead he quotes H. G. Wells. Thanks to Ashoka's edicts as inscribed on some fifty pillars and rock faces, the Mauryan emperor emerges as the first ruler to hold sway over the whole subcontinent and the first to whom regnal dates can be ascribed (*c*.269–232 BC). Ashoka is also credited with having officially promoted Buddhism though, as Robinson notes, only once does an edict actually mention the Buddha.

All this leaves just fifteen pages for the next millennium and not much more for the Islamic and British periods. Perhaps this is as it should be. What used to be called "the medieval period" is poorly documented, while most Indians today would happily gloss over the centuries of foreign rule. A short history is bound to have its shortcomings. Moreover Andrew Robinson makes ample amends in respect of the struggle for independence and its aftermath. This is a most refreshing résumé, and one can only be grateful for a history that consigns the Black Hole of Calcutta to a black hole.