

[Peter Gordon 10 July 2024](#) [Non-Fiction](#)

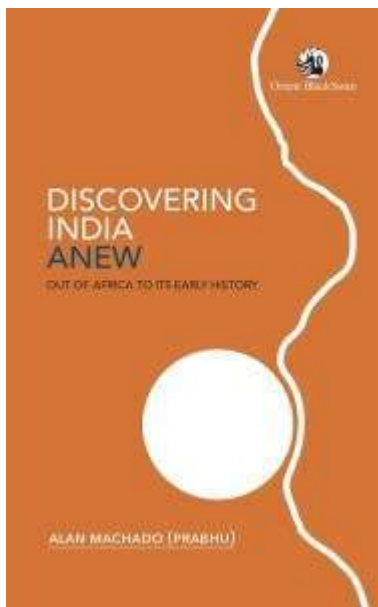
“Discovering India Anew: Out of Africa to Its Early History” by Alan Machado (Prabhu)



“**W**here does one begin unravelling the history of India and its peoples,” asks Alan Machado (Prabhu) in the first paragraph of his new book *Discovering India Anew*. At the beginning, he says.

There is, and only can be, one beginning. Today a host of disciplines and technologies, many of them recent developments, are being applied to uncover and write the history of India and Indians. The story they tell begins in Africa.

And what a story it is.



Discovering India Anew: Out of Africa to Its Early History, Alan Machado (Prabhu) (Orient BlackSwan, June 2024)

This is, roughly, a book on Indian pre-history, although that is not a term that the author himself resorts to. His narrative comes to a close well before the common era; Ashoka is not mentioned. Such written sources (there are many references to the Rig Veda, here Rgveda) as exist for the period were written down a great many centuries after the events they purport to record: more Homer than Thucydides. Conclusions are drawn from genetics, linguistics, archaeology and careful readings of the texts, not

just Sanskrit but also Avestan and other languages and a great deal of interdisciplinary cross-comparison.

Machado (Prabhu) is nothing if not encyclopedic; indeed, the book is constructed from a multitude of short sections, few much longer than a page, most preceded by a list of sources whence the author evidently drew his material. For those interested in this story (and it should interest non-Indians as much as Indians, for the material not just fills in some large blanks in world history but is fascinating on its own), but for whom it is unfamiliar, *Discovering India Anew* is, unless one can cite haplogroup distributions off-the-cuff, perhaps not the best place to start: *Early Indians: The Story Of Our Ancestors and Where We Came From* by Tony Joseph and *Aryans: The Search for a People, a Place and a Myth* by Charles Allen are more immediately accessible. But Machado (Prabhu) contains more information and is more explicitly rigorous.

The outlines of the story are by now reasonably well-known: modern humans came to India very early, much earlier than Europe, and the remnants of these almost 60-70,000 year-old so-called “Out of Africa” populations still remain in isolated pockets—the Andaman islands being one—as well as in the genetics of the Indian population as a whole. More than most such narratives, Machado (Prabhu) spends considerable time on paleolithic and neolithic periods, including the introduction of agriculture. (Rice seems to have been brought from East Asia very early on.)

But the narrative really gets going, as such narratives are wont to do, when he gets to Harappa and then the Indo-Aryan migrations, for which he pulls out all the stops: studies of languages, comparative mythologies, references in contemporary foreign sources, archaeology, genetics, linguistics, geography. He strays far from India itself, to Mesopotamia, the Gulf, Central Asia.

Even those who know the general outlines of this narrative will likely find a myriad of factoids that surprise. For example:

The overriding feature of the Mature Harappan is the overall acceptance for 700 years, despite regional differences, or a unifying culture by a million people inhabiting a diverse geographical environment spread over a million sq kms...

an area “over twelve times the settled area of Egypt and Mesopotamia combined”. He goes on to note that

Harappan urban planning and sanitation levels were not reached again globally until 2,000 years later, in Rome.

There seems little doubt now that Harappa was (proto)-Dravidian:

Dravidian and Elamite have a common origin. Interestingly, the Tamil word for homeland is *eelam*, similar to Elam, the homeland of the Elamite...

And it may be that the as yet elusive Harappan script had its origins in potters' marks.

Machado (Prabhu) draws a very clear line chronological between the Harappan and Indo-Aryans

South Asia's earliest literature, a legacy of the Vedic arya, contains tantalizing bits of information from which some of the history of those times can be reconstructed. A striking revelation is the total lack of mention of Harappan cities. Rather, they speak only of their long-neglected ruins.

For all of the author's rigorous matter-of-factness, he will occasionally wax eloquent, whether speculating about “a resident of Jurreru River Valley” in what is now Andhra Pradesh watching the approaching darkness from the eruption of the super-volcano

Toba that 74,000 years ago almost snuffed humanity out, or describing the famous Harappan bronze dancing girl: “thin and supple, a model that would be totally at home in any global fashion show today.” He’s clearly rather taken with her.

He also, somewhat surprisingly, draws parallels between British imperialism (“How did such a miniscule number govern such a large population inhabiting such a vast, diverse land?”) and the Indo-Aryans. Yet unlike other similar histories which explicitly push back against certain contemporary political narratives, Machado (Prabhu) makes his points subtly, significant only if one is aware of the counter-narrative; for example

The majority of present-day Indian Muslims have a close genetic affinity with indigenous non-Muslim populations ... There is a significant correlation between genetics and geography but not religion. In other words, Muslim communities are generally closer to non-Muslim geographic neighbors than to other Muslims in India.

This is a fine book, but the highly segmented structure, which allows the coverage of a great deal of material in a targeted way, also results in repetition. It is hard for the layman to evaluate the validity of the evidence—unlike the linguistics, which is relatively intuitive, the genetics is rather obscure—but the narrative as a whole hangs together and Machado (Prabhu) is careful to cross-reference indications from different disciplines.

This is a fast-changing field of study: one would have been hard-pressed to write such a book a decade ago and a new edition will probably be needed a few years hence. But in the meantime, for those that have some prior familiarity with the outlines of the story, *Discovering India Anew* will provide nuance and insight.