

# THE GREAT INDIAN PARADOX

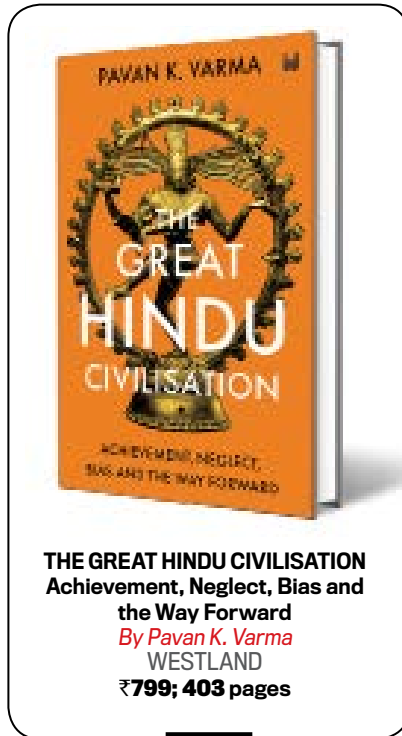
By **Rajmohan Gandhi**

**T**his book confirms the breadth of the author's interests. Whether it is the paintings, dance or sculpture of ancient India, the wonders of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the wisdom of the Upanishads, or something else, Pavan K. Varma's *The Great Hindu Civilisation* provides confident observations. What also comes across is Varma's pride in Hindu civilisation. However, rage is this book's strongest note. Rage at the under-appreciation of this civilisation by Indians themselves.

Offering, too, a hurried tour of Indian history, the book contains surprising errors. Varma writes (p. 196) that Aurangzeb "assassinated the last Sikh Guru Gobind Singh". Aurangzeb had died in February 1707, 20 months *before* Guru Gobind Singh was stabbed to death in Nanded. After correctly quoting Gandhi to the effect that even if all other Hindu and non-Hindu texts in the world disappeared, one short verse in the Isha Upanishad would suffice for his soul, Varma gives us (p. 320) the wrong verse!

Not many will agree with Varma's description of Ram Mohan Roy as "an important ally" for the British, or with the book's downplaying (pp. 250-52) of the pernicious *sati* custom, against which Roy had applied his fearless mind and all his energies. Indignant at the success of Macaulay and company in "anglicising" the minds of the Indian elite, Varma underestimates both the pioneering greatness of men like Roy and the unfortunate prestige that was given to *sati*. Ten years after British India had made *sati* illegal, when Ranjit Singh died in his Lahore kingdom, four of the Maharaja's ranis and seven of his slave-girls ascended the pyre to be burnt alive.

I cannot complain that Varma's book omits this 1839 episode. How many events can one book cover? In any case, the bulk of this book is about the



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Achievement, Neglect, Bias and  
the Way Forward  
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grandeur of Hindu civilisation and the damage done to it first by Islamic rule from the end of the 12th century and then by British rule from the middle of the 18th.

Varma's condensation of Hindu civilisation's achievements is formidable. He underlines the civilisation's intellectual character. An early chapter is called 'The Audacity of Thought'. Whether in religion, art, or politics, the ancient Hindu mind was bold. Hinduism distinguished itself, the author points out, through dissent and debate, not by its dogmas. In the Mahabharata, he reminds us, pragmatism joins moral challenge, turning its heroes and gods into fallible and even deceiving human beings.

In politics, not only did the Mauryans create a pan-Indian empire three centuries before the common

era and the Guptas a similar if smaller kingdom from about 400 CE, political theorists like Chanakya laid out the principles of empire, governance, taxation, espionage and war.

Who can resist being awed? But questions too arise irresistibly, and it's a pity that Varma ignores them altogether. Given all the wisdom he summarises, why was a stable pan-Indian polity such a rarity in the several millennia of this astonishing civilisation? Even when no invading Turks, Arabs or Europeans were around? When invasions did come in later centuries, why was resistance so ineffective?

The audacity of Indian thought included a respect for ideas, even sharply dissenting ones. But respect for fellow human beings was in short supply. This Varma refuses to admit. While wonderstruck by the feats of Hindu civilisation and upset that these are not recalled enough, Varma will not dwell on the inhumanity of untouchability and the hierarchies and exclusions that our society has permitted for centuries.

Varma's concluding chapter is on "The Modern Republic". He acknowledges the roles of Gandhi and Nehru, airs criticisms of the two, and also criticises the idea of a Hindu rashtra, while finding much to praise too in the RSS and Savarkar. He seems somewhat troubled by the tolerance of coercion against the weak in today's India. But these misgivings are expressed softly, even hesitantly.

What attracts this book's unrestrained passion is the presumed neglect of our great civilisation. In the India and world of 2021, this exclusive focus seems odd. ■

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