



# The Past Before Us

*Romila Thapar*

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## **The Past Before Us** Romila Thapar

The claim that India--uniquely among civilizations--lacks historical writing distracts us from a more pertinent question: how to recognize the historical sense of societies whose past is recorded in ways very different from European conventions. Romila Thapar, a distinguished scholar of ancient India, guides us through a panoramic survey of the historical traditions of North India, revealing a deep and sophisticated consciousness of history embedded in the diverse body of classical Indian literature.

The history recorded in such texts as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata is less concerned with authenticating persons and events than with presenting a picture of traditions striving to retain legitimacy amid social change. Spanning an epoch from 1000 BCE to 1400 CE, Thapar delineates three strains of historical writing: an Itihasa-Purana tradition of Brahman authors; a tradition composed mainly by Buddhist and Jaina monks and scholars; and a popular bardic tradition. The Vedic corpus, the epics, the Buddhist canon and monastic chronicles, inscriptional evidence, regional accounts, and literary forms such as royal biographies and drama are all scrutinized afresh--not as sources to be mined for factual data but as genres that disclose how Indians of ancient times represented their own past to themselves.

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