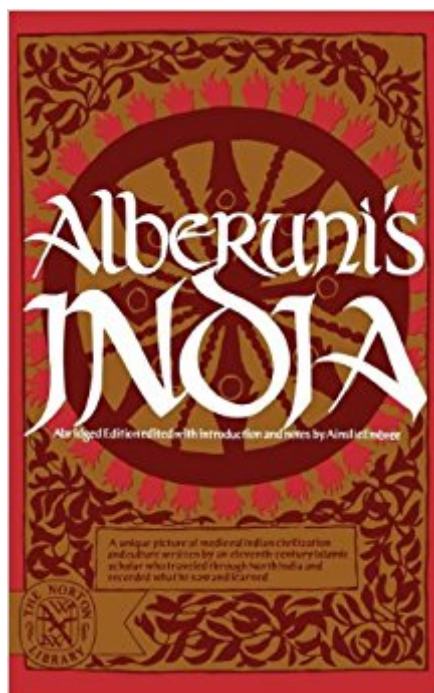


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Alberuni's India (Norton Library (Paperback))



Synopsis

Alberuni's India is one of the greatest achievements of medieval scholarship. Not for nearly eight hundred years would any other writer match Alberuni's profound understanding of almost all aspects of Indian life. In 1017 A.D., Sultan Mahmud, ruler of a great empire in what is now Afghanistan and Iran, brought to his court at Ghazna many of the most brilliant scholars of the Islamic world. Among them was Alberuni (or Al Biruni), who was renowned as a mathematician, astronomer, and political philosopher. Alberuni's aim was to acquire an exact understanding of the Hindus' knowledge of the natural world, to make it possible for Muslims "to converse with the Hindus, and to discuss with them questions of religion, science, or literature, on the very basis of their own civilization." For thirteen years he traveled in North India, observing, questioning, and studying. The result was an account of Indian culture that is unique in its sympathetic understanding, shrewdness of observation, and probing analysis.

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Customer Reviews

Alberuni's India is one of the greatest achievements of medieval scholarship. Not for nearly eight hundred years would any other writer match Alberuni's profound understanding of almost all aspects of Indian life. In 1017 A.D., Sultan Mahmud, ruler of a great empire in what is now Afghanistan and Iran, brought to his court at Ghazna many of the most brilliant scholars of the Islamic world. Among them was Alberuni (or Al Biruni), who was renowned as a mathematician, astronomer, and political philosopher. Alberuni's aim was to acquire an exact understanding of the Hindus' knowledge of the

natural world, to make it possible for Muslims "to converse with the Hindus, and to discuss with them questions of religion, science, or literature, on the very basis of their own civilization." For thirteen years he traveled in North India, observing, questioning, and studying. The result was an account of Indian culture that is unique in its sympathetic understanding, shrewdness of observation, and probing analysis.

This is a must have for history buffs who are specifically into Indian history. The translator has done a very good job and it gives a wonderful picture of the times when Al Beruni came to India as a minister of the invader Mohammed Ghazni. The tone in the book is critical and irreverent of the Indian society as understood by Al Baruni but one must be neutral while reading it to absorb the content. Its just his opinion and one can get a wonderful peek into the life in those times from this very authentic book.

Over the course of history only a few people stick out as truly exceptional. Some are leaders, some religious figures, and even fewer, intellectual giants. Al Biruni, born in 973 A.D. in what is now Uzbekistan, was one such. He had access to learning, became attached to several different courts, and died at the age of 65 in Ghazni, Afghanistan. At the time, Muslim cultures had inherited Greek learning and were advanced in science, mathematics, medicine, and literature. The Ummayad Empire, which encompassed Central Asia, was a main center of world culture then. During his life, Al Biruni had many opportunities to visit India in the entourage of Mahmud Ghaznavi, not a very savory figure in Indian history.. The very different civilization he found there fascinated him, though as a devout Muslim he could not approve Hindu religious doctrine or practice. Still, he learned Sanskrit, collected as many texts as he could, and wrote a huge compendium about India. It covers many fields which may not be very interesting to modern readers---esoteric doctrines, astrological details, inheritance customs, and Hindu astronomical knowledge. But within lie an amazing amount of detail which can be found almost nowhere else. The Indians did not write such books and for centuries there were few foreign visitors, even fewer who wrote anything. Much of our knowledge of medieval India is based on Al-Biruni. In this book you can get it from the horse's mouth, as it were. Not only did Al Biruni leave this giant work (which is only partially translated here). We should also remember him as one of the only Muslim authors in history to take an interest in Hindu religion and culture, trying to understand it on its own terms. This required a leap which was not made by Europeans till the 19th century, the early visitors having ignored or condemned Indian belief systems out of hand. So, not only can you develop a picture of 11th century India from Al Biruni, but

you can admire the prodigious work of a man who could stretch the boundaries of knowledge, casting aside the prejudices and boundaries of his times. I won't tell you that you can read ALBERUNI'S INDIA from cover to cover, but if this subject interests you, you'll find something worthwhile. I have given the book only three stars because much of it is not very readable, but as a historical document, it of course deserves five.

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