

BOOK REVIEW PUBLISHED IN INDIAN REVIEW OF BOOKS

"Guns, Germs And Steel; a short history of everybody for the last 13,000 years", by Jared Diamond, Vintage, (1998), 4.20 Pounds.

On 16 November 1532, in the Peruvian highland town of Cajamarca, the Inca emperor, Atahualpa, the absolute monarch of the largest and most advanced state of the New World, met Francisco Pizarro, the illegitimate son of a Spanish sailor. Pizarro was leading a band of 168 Spanish soldiers to explore the legendary wealth of the Andean kingdom. What happened on that fateful day was not only astonishing, but in some ways changed the course for history for the people of the New World. Though having an army of 80,000, Atahualpa was captured by Pizarro and held captive. The king's ransom paid by the Incas, enough gold to fill a room 22 feet long, 17 feet wide and 8 feet high was not enough to secure the release of the emperor. Atahualpa was executed by the Spanish conquistador.

The Incas in the Andes, the Aztecs in Mexico and Central America, the aboriginals in New Guinea, the list is long of the European domination of indigenous people in all the corners of the world. The question to ask is, "why was it that the Europeans conquered Atahualpa and others and not the other way around?" The usual answer is that the Europeans possessed guns and superior technology. It is also well known that many more indigenous people were killed in the New World by the Old World diseases like smallpox and syphilis than in the war with the colonialists. But that is just begging the question of 'how and why did the Europeans instead of the aboriginal Australians come to possess Guns, Germs and Steel? Why did history unfold differently on different continents?

These are the questions which Jared Diamond sets out to answer in this extraordinarily ambitious book. From the beginning, the author rejects any idea of genetic superiority of the Europeans which led them to conquer most of the world. Instead, he asserts that, "History followed different courses for different people because of differences among people's environments, not because of biological differences among people themselves". This is the central theme which he develops with great coherence. In its scope and bringing together of diverse causes for historical events, it is comparable to Fernand Braudel's "The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the time of Philip II". Though it lacks some of the historical details of Braudel's book, in its chronological scope it is clearly broader.

The book is divided into four parts. Part I sets the stage for the exploration by describing the archaeological and other evidences of human habitation in various continents. Then comes a more or less descriptive account of how one set of people came to dominate another. The examples he chooses are the Spanish conquest of the Incas and the domination of the people of Chatham Islands in the South Pacific by the Maori of New Zealand. The seven chapters of Part II deal with the rise and spread of food production in the ancient world. Here Diamond uses tools from archaeology, ecology, genetics, physiology and linguistics to describe why only certain areas of the world domesticated plant varieties. The domestication of the cereals in the Fertile Crescent and of corn in the New World, the suitability of certain kinds of wild plants to domestication and finally the climatic factors responsible for their spread are explained. This part forms the core of the book and also has a discussion on the domestication of large mammals and the role it played in the development of societies. Part III deals with the evolution and the importance of germs, technology (writing, steel, paper etc.) and systems of governance. The last part is a synthesis and application of all the arguments to the specific cases of histories of Australia, China, Africa and the Americas. The book ends with an epilogue in which Diamond makes an impassioned appeal to treat history of human societies as a science, much like the other historical sciences of astronomy, palaeontology and geology.

The book is written with the lay reader in mind. It is wonderfully readable and yet not trivial. The arguments are lucid and the synthesis of history, linguistics, biology among others is ambitious.

There are thankfully no footnotes but an extensive bibliography in the end which would help the interested reader to follow up on the line of thinking in the book. Interestingly though, Joseph Needham does not find a reference in the bibliography while Braudel is only mentioned as an aside!

The arguments laid out by Diamond are very impressive. They may be proved to be wrong by further research, but that is exactly the point. The most significant thing about the book is the questions he raises and the methodology he uses. And what's more, he writes with a passion which comes through in reading the book. This book is easily one of the most thought provoking book I have read in a long time.