


# Puspa Shrestha

Best Quality Resource Site for Class 11 And 12 Students  
(Based on Updated Curriculum 2077)

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**Before reading**

Answer the following questions.

- a. What do you know about the Chinese civilization?
- c. Are there any similarities between South Indian and Chinese civilizations? Discuss.

Prof. Yuval Noah Harari is a historian, philosopher, and the bestselling author of *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, *21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, and *Sapiens: A Graphic History*. He is a Co-founder of Sapienship, a multidisciplinary organization advocating for global responsibility whose mission is to clarify the public conversation, support the quest for solutions and focus attention on the most important challenges facing the world today. He is now a lecturer in the Department of History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.



Harari exemplifies the virtue of *humility* in that he debunks humanity's illusions of superiority and mastery. He claims morality, art, spirituality and creativity are universal human abilities embedded in our DNA.

*You are not the centre of the world*

Most people tend to believe they are the centre of the world, and their culture is the linchpin of human history. Many Greeks believe that history began with Homer, Sophocles and Plato, and that all important ideas and inventions were born in Athens, Sparta, Alexandria or Constantinople. Chinese nationalists retort that history really began with the Yellow Emperor and the Xia and Shang dynasties, and that whatever Westerners, Muslims or Indians achieved is but a pale copy of original Chinese breakthroughs.

Hindu nativists dismiss these Chinese boasts, and argue that even airplanes and nuclear bombs were invented by ancient sages in the Indian subcontinent long before Confucius or Plato, not to mention Einstein and the Wright brothers. Did you know, for example, that it was Maharishi Bhardwaj who invented rockets and aeroplanes, that Vishwamitra not only invented but also used missiles, that Acharya Kanad was

the father of atomic theory, and that the Mahabharata accurately describes nuclear weapons?

Pious Muslims regard all history prior to the Prophet Muhammad as largely irrelevant, and they consider all history after the revelation of the Quran to revolve around the Muslim *ummah*. The main exceptions are Turkish, Iranian and Egyptian nationalists, who argue that even prior to Muhammad their particular nation was the fountainhead of all that was good about humanity, and that even after the revelation of the Quran, it was mainly their people who preserved the purity of Islam and spread its glory.

Needless to say that British, French, German, American, Russian, Japanese and countless other groups are similarly convinced that humankind would have lived in barbarous and immoral ignorance if it wasn't for the spectacular achievements of their nation. Some people in history went so far as to imagine that the political institutions and religious practices were essential to the very laws of physics. Thus the Aztecs firmly believed that without the sacrifices they performed each year, the sun would not rise and the entire universe would disintegrate.

All these claims are false. They combine a wilful ignorance of history with more than a hint of racism. None of the religions or nations of today existed when humans colonised the world, domesticated plants and animals, built the first cities, or invented writing and money. Morality, art, spirituality and creativity are universal human abilities embedded in our DNA. Their genesis was in Stone Age Africa. It is therefore crass egotism to ascribe to them a more recent place and time, be they China in the age of the Yellow Emperor, Greece in the age of Plato, or Arabia in the age of Muhammad.

Personally, I am all too familiar with such crass egotism, because the Jews, my own people, also think that they are the most important thing in the world. Name any human achievement or invention, and they will quickly claim credit for it. And knowing them intimately, I also know they are genuinely convinced of such claims. I once went to a yoga teacher in Israel, who in the introductory class explained in all seriousness that yoga was invented by Abraham, and that all the basic yoga postures derive from the shape of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet! (Thus the *trikonasana* posture imitates the shape of the Hebrew letter *aleph*, *tulandadasana* imitates the letter *daled*, etc.) Abraham taught these postures to the son of one of his concubines, who went to India and taught yoga to the Indians. When I asked for some evidence, the master quoted

a biblical passage: 'And to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, and while he was still living he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country' (Genesis 25:6). What do you think these gifts were? So you see, even yoga was actually invented by the Jews.

Considering Abraham to be the inventor of yoga is a fringe notion. Yet mainstream Judaism solemnly maintains that the entire cosmos exists just so that Jewish rabbis can study their holy scriptures, and that if Jews cease this practice, the universe will come to an end. China, India, Australia and even the distant galaxies will all be annihilated if the rabbis in Jerusalem and Brooklyn stop debating the Talmud. This is a central article of faith of Orthodox Jews, and anyone who dares doubt it is considered an ignorant fool. Secular Jews may be a bit more sceptical about this grandiose claim, but they too believe that the Jewish people are the central heroes of history and the ultimate wellspring of human morality, spirituality and learning.

What my people lack in numbers and real influence, they more than compensate for in chutzpah. Since it is more polite to criticise one's own people than to criticise foreigners, I will use the example of Judaism to illustrate how ludicrous such self-important narratives are, and I will leave it to readers around the world to puncture the hot-air balloons inflated by their own tribes.

## **Glossary**

linchpin (n.): the most important thing

retort (v.): make a quick reply to an accusation or a challenge

barbarous (adj.): cruel or wild

spectacular (adj.): impressive

disintegrate (v.): to break or cause sth to break into small parts or pieces

embedded (v.): to fix sth deeply and firmly in a mass of sth

genesis (n.): origin of sth

egotism (n.): the practice of thinking and talking too often or too much about oneself

concubines (n.): (in countries a man can legally have more than one wife) a woman who lives with a man, often as well as his wife or wives, but with lower status

fringe (n.): the front part of sb's hair, cut so that it hangs over the forehead

annihilated (v.): to destroy sb/sth completely

grandiose (adj.): more elaborate than necessary

chutzpah (n.): extreme self-confidence, audacity

ludicrous (adj.): ridiculous, absurd

## ***Understanding the text***

Answer the following questions.

- a. Describe the claim of the Chinese nationalists about the human history.
- b. What do pious Muslims believe about the human history?
- c. What did the Aztecs firmly believe about the universe?
- d. What, according to the essay, are the universal human abilities?
- e. How are the basic yoga postures derived from the shape of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet?

## ***Reference to the context***

- a. How do Hindu nationalists refute the Chinese claim that human history really began with the Yellow Emperor and the Xia and Shang dynasties? Who do you agree with, and why?
- b. The author has dealt with a controversial debate on human history. Why do you think history has been a major contested issue in the present world?

## ***Reference beyond the text***

- a. Write a short essay on **The Conflicting History of Human Civilization**.
- b. The author claims, “Since it is more polite to criticize one’s own people than to criticize foreigners.” Do you agree to his claim? Give your reasons.