

FACTS *against* MYTHS

Distorting and Fabricating India's History? The "Aryan Invasion" and its Myths

Comment:

For decades there has been a great debate over the question: Did the ancient "Vedic" civilization originate in India or did it come to India from outside? In short, this is all about the "Aryan Invasion Theory". It refers to

- Theories postulating pre-historic Indo-Aryan migrations. That is, Indo-Aryan invaders overthrew the Indus Valley Civilisation;
- Indo-Aryan migration theory, that is, the Indo-Aryan migrated into India, and
- Indigenous Aryan Theory (also the Out of India theory) , that is, the Indo-Aryans originated within India itself as an alternative to the migration model which proposes the Pontic (Black Sea) steppe area of the origin of the Indo European languages

In reference to Aryans, Indians generally consider themselves either as "North Indian" and "South Indian". Some even like the South Indian politicians (especially those of the "Dravidian" parties of Tamil Nadu accuse the "upper caste" even among South Indians of being Aryans). Thus, Indians always held (if not completely accepted) the belief that India comprised of two races of people – the Aryans and the Dravidians. The former were typically North Indians and "upper caste" people; the Dravidians were typically South Indians and "lower caste" people.

Over the years, these beliefs have become prone to rabid ideological influences among especially the religious revivalist Hindus for whom these beliefs

- * split Hindus into 2 or 4 groups – Northern and Southern Hindus and upper and lower caste – and saw Muslim and Christians as aliens. Such schisms within Hinduism were an unacceptable form of weakness;
- * their own perception stemming out of deep insecurity was that the schism questions the legitimacy of the Hindu Vedic tradition that suggested that it had emerged into India from external regions and as such unworthy of any legitimacy as an authentic, indigenous civilization.

For these two reasons Hindu revivalists go on an over-drive, "to disparage the Aryan Invasion Theory" and manufacture a devious thought process in which such an invasion never occurred!¹ This is understandable why they strive to eliminate regional, linguistic and caste differences among Hindus through a positive appeal to unifying ideas. In so doing they deceptively impute anti-national motives to historians whilst presenting a sanitized history of India, and cleansed of unpleasant facts² on caste discrimination. They then re-invent the wheel and manufacture a new Indian history, "in their own image", which is an attempt that bypasses the abundantly scientific and inclusive

population history. After all, the migration of humans from Africa began around 60,000 ago into India, Europe, etc., or pastoral groups who migrated from Central Asia or elsewhere and settled in India in gradual waves. As they settled here, they too become part of the vast population of India.

Evidently, the history and culture of India (like those of other great centres of civilisation) can thus be interpreted in a number of different ways – ranging from, “all of history is the history of class struggle” to the extreme, “one land, one folk, one leader, one religion, one law”... and just about everything in between. The latter (proponents) manufacture concepts – its sheer hilarity and idiocy apart – that fail to square with scientific data. Illustrations of this include ideas of gravity and the spherical shape of planet earth were discoveries by Indian scientists! Their warped imaginations also assert that the Vedas is the cradle of all the science that we have knowledge of. Some even assert that Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution is “scientifically wrong” and needs modification.

Interpretations like these are subject of endless stream of arguments and counter arguments. In the end, however what matters is the cold, hard reality: opposing verifiable, scientific data and facts is as foolish as believing that our planet earth is flat. In a similar vein, communities in India have rich historical memories that are different from one another. Scholarship on such historical events can be contextualised in different strands. However, to willfully privilege a particular strand and relegate the rest for narrow sectarian gain, often amount to a communal rendering or reading of the event. The case, for instance, of the 1921 Malabar Rebellion or Moplah Revolt – aimed to unite Hindus and Muslims – to overthrow British colonial occupation of India. This event is however misinterpreted now as an anti-Hindu revolt!?

Moreover, groups like the RSS to openly privilege to themselves the claim to superiority of Indian civilization to the rest of world’s culture and civilization is not merely abominable but racist. After all, modern human knowledge is a sum of all the knowledge that various civilisations have gathered and/or generated over millennia

Warped narratives as illustrated above are now mushrooming regularly, serving as a) ideological and b) political ploys. Side by side, the

government has launched a committee to re-write Indian history beginning with the Ramayana³ which incidentally also deals with evolution. The bottom line of the rewriting of history is linked to the definition of who is a Hindu – in line with the project to make India Hindu. According to the RSS a Hindu is one that India is the ‘pitrabhumi’ (ancestral land) and ‘punyabhumi’ (the land of his religion). Thus the “logic”: A Hindu therefore could not be descended from alien invaders. Since Hindu sought a lineal descent from the Aryans, the Aryans had to be indigenous. In these definition minorities like the Muslims, Christians, etc., are excluded – from being indigenous since their religion did not originate in India.⁴

Indeed, the need for much of our history to be re-written, or, for that matter our whole education system, is legitimate but not without first cleansing historical documents of its racial, casteist, un-scientific and un-historical prejudices. On the other hand, the attempt to construct, for instance, a sanitized conception of Ram as a kind of exclusionary cultural, nationalistic and political tool is anathema to the very nature of a such a sublime text; it deprives the Ramayana of its pluralistic tradition of having variant texts that co-existed in myth, literature.⁵ Perhaps, as a first step in this goal of the re-writing of history, “We must make Hanuman a human first”³ and appropriately re-write the Ramayana for scientific veracity, political correctness and historical accuracy.

MYTH: Aryans were originally from India, and creators of the Indus Civilization

FACT: Popular culture as shown in the ahistorical Bollywood movie, Mohenjo Daro, portrays the Harappan population as using a very Sanskritised Hinduism and thus implies that the Rg. Vedic culture and the Harappan civilization were the same.⁶ Further, in 1999, an American NRI, N.S. Rajaram and palaeographer N.Jha stated, in their book, “The Deciphered Indus Script: Methodology, Readings, Interpretations” that the Harappan script was from the Sanskrit family. They then attempted to link Harappan archaeology to Vedic literature.

Attempts to decipher the Indus language as Sanskrit have failed. Sanskrit, the language of the Vedas is an Indo-Aryan language, which shares roots and similarities with European

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Questioning the Harappan Horse Myths

The horses found in the early excavations at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa do not come from secure levels and such 'horse' bones, in most cases, found their way into deposits through erosional cutting and refilling, disturbing the archaeological layers.

In The Hindu of March 5, 2002, Michael Witzel, of Harvard University, in debating the Harappan Horse, notes how the noted mathematician, N.S. Rajaram, posits a truism "A theory must not contradict empirical facts," but he then does not deliver on the 'empirical facts.'! As a scientist, he must be corrected... Philology, incidentally, is not the same as linguistics, as he says, but the study of a civilisation based on its texts.

In order to understand such texts, one must acquire the necessary knowledge in all relevant fields, from astronomy to zoology. It is precisely a proper background in zoology, particularly in palaeontology, that is badly lacking in Rajaram's, the scientist's, account. Instead, it is he, and not his favourite straw man, the Indologist, who has created some new "myths and conjectures ... through the force of repetition." Let us deconstruct them one by one.

• Harappan horses?

To begin with, Rajaram claims that "both the spoke-wheel and the horse were widely used by the Harappans." He quotes S.P. Gupta, without naming him, from a recent book (The Dawn of Indian Civilisation, ed. by G.C. Pande, 1999). According to Gupta the horse (*Equus caballus*) "was widely domesticated and used in India during the third millennium BC over most of the area covered by the Indus-Sarasvati (or Harappan) Civilisation. Archaeologically this is most significant since the evidence is widespread and not isolated."

Nothing in his assertion is correct, even if — or rather because — it comes from an archaeologist and inventive rewriter of history, S.P. Gupta. For example, the horses found in the early excavations at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa do not come from secure levels and such 'horse' bones, in most cases, found their way into deposits through erosional cutting and refilling, disturbing the archaeological layers.

Indeed, not one clear example of horse bones exists in the Indus excavations and elsewhere in North India before c. 1800 BCE. Such 'horse' skeletons have not been properly reported from distinct and secure archaeological layers, and worse, they have not been compared with relevant collections of ancient skeletons and modern horses (Meadow 1996: 392). Instead, well recorded and stratified finds of horse figures and later on, of horse bones (along with the imported camel and donkey), first occur in the Kachi plain on the border of Sindh/E. Baluchistan (c. 1800-1500 BCE), when the mature Indus Civilisation had already disintegrated.

Even more importantly, the only true native equid of South Asia is the untamable khur (*Equus hemionus*, onager/wild-ass) that still survives in the Rann of Kutch. Both share a common ancestor which is now put at ca. 1.72 million years ago (while the first *Equus* specimen is attested already 3.7 mya.). The differences between a half-ass skeleton and that of a horse are so small that one needs a trained specialist plus the lucky find of the lower forelegs of a horse/onager to determine which is which, for "bones of a larger khur will overlap in size with those of a small horse, and bones of a small khur will overlap in size with those of a donkey." (Meadow 1996: 406).

To merely compare sizes, as Rajaram does, following the dubious decades old Harappan data of Marshall, and then to connect the long gone "*Equus Sivalensis*" with the so-called "Anau horse", resulting in the "Indian country" type, is just another blunder....

Proper judgment is not possible as long as none of the above precautions are taken, and when — as is often done — just incomplete skeletons or teeth are compared, all of which is done without the benefit of a suitable collection of standard sets of onager, donkey and horse skeletons. Rajaram and his fellow rewriters of history thus are free to turn any local half-ass into a Harappan horse, just as he has already done (see Frontline, Oct./Nov. 2000) with his half-bull.

Further, the archaeologists claiming to have found horses in Indus sites are not trained zoologists or palaeontologists... Typically, S.P. Gupta (1999) does not add any new evidence, and just repeats palaeontologically unsubstantiated claims that are, to quote Rajaram, “myths and conjectures... through the force of repetition.”

• **The Siwalik Equid**

In addition, Rajaram conjures up another phantom, the Siwalik horse: “fossil remains of *Equus Sivalensis* (the ‘Siwalik horse’) show that the 34-ribbed horse has been known in India going back tens of thousands of years.” Standard palaeontology handbooks (B.J. MacFadden, *Fossil Horses*, 1992) would have told him that the Siwalik horse, first found in the northern hills of Pakistan, is not just “going back tens of thousands of years” but is in fact 2.6 million years old. However, it has long died out during the last Ice Age, as part of the late Pleistocene megafaunal extinction of about 10,000 years ago (i.e. at the end of the Late Upper Pleistocene, 75-10,000 y.a.: it is reportedly found in middle to late Pleistocene locations in the Siwaliks and in Tamil Nadu, and recently, as a “Great Indian horse” in Andhra, 75,000 y.a.). But there is, to my knowledge, no account of a Siwalik horse that even remotely approaches the date of the Indus Civilisation — nor does Rajaram quote any authority to this effect.

Nevertheless, in order to bolster his claim for the antiquity of the “Vedic horse (as) a native Indian breed”, he connects this dead horse with the Rigvedic one, which is described as having 34 ribs (Rigveda 1.162.18). But, while horses (*Equus caballus*) generally have 18 ribs on each side, this can individually vary with 17 on just one or on both sides. This is not a genetically inherited trait. Such is also the case with the equally variable (5 instead of 6) lumbar vertebrae, as found in some early domestic horses in Egypt (2nd. mill. BCE) and in the closely related modern Central Asian Przewalski horse (which shares the same ancestor, 620-320,000 years ago, with the domestic horse/*Equus ferus*).

As for the number 34, numeral symbolism may play a role in this Rigveda passage dealing with a horse sacrificed for the gods. The number of gods in the Rigveda is 33 or 33+1, which obviously corresponds to the 34 ribs of the horse, that in turn is speculatively brought into connection with all the gods, many of whom are mentioned by name (Rigveda 1.162-3). But this is mere philology, not worthy of “scientific” study...

In sum, even S. Bokonyi, the palaeontologist who sought to identify a horse skeleton at the Surkotada site of the Indus Civilisation, stated that “horses reached the Indian subcontinent in an already domesticated form coming from the Inner Asiatic horse domestication centers” — just as they were imported into the ancient Near East about 2000 BCE. Any zoological handbook would have told the scientist Rajaram the same (MacFadden 1992).

In addition, the identification the Surkotada equid as horse by S. Bokonyi is disputed by R. Meadow and A. Patel (1997). Even if this were indeed the only archaeologically and palaeontologically secure Indus horse available so far, it would not turn the Indus Civilisation into one teeming with horses (as the Rigveda indeed is, a few hundred years later). A tiger skeleton in the Roman Colosseum does not make this Asian predator a natural inhabitant of Italy. In short, to state that the “Vedic horse is a native Indian breed and not the Central Asian horse” is just another fantasy of the current rewriters of Indian history.

Nevertheless, Rajaram even repeats some of his own “myths and conjectures, (which) through the force of repetition, have come to acquire the status of historical facts,” namely the old

canard that “depictions of the horse are known at Harappan sites, though rare” — a case of fraud and fantasy that has been exploded more than a year ago in Frontline (Oct./Nov. 2000). Apparently, he thinks, along with other politicians, that repeating an untruth long enough will turn it into a fact.

• **Spoke-wheeled Chariots**

Rajaram, in dire need of ‘Rigvedic’ horse-drawn chariots for the Harappan period, then introduces spoked wheels into the Indus Civilisation: “terracotta wheels at various Harappan sites. ... The painted lines (spokes) converge at the central hub, and thus leave no doubt about their representing the spokes of the wheel.”

The handful existing specimens of such terracotta disks may indeed look, even to a trained archaeologist, like a spoked wheel — especially when he wants to find Aryan chariots, just like Aryan fire altars, all over the Indus area. But, they may just as well have been simple spindle whorls, used in spinning very real yarn, not wild Aryan tales. Further, “spoked wheel patterns” occur in cultures that never had the wheel, such as pre-Columbian North American civilisations. In other words, all of this proves nothing as long as we do not find a pair of these “spoked wheels” in situ, along with a Harappan toy cart. Normally, the wheels of such toy carts are of the heavy, full wheel type (that is made of three interlocked wood blocks).

Rajaram then asserts, for good measure, that the “depiction of the spoke-wheel is quite common on Harappan seals.” This refers to the wheel-like signs in Harappan script. Unfortunately, these “wheels” can easily be explained as unrelated artistic designs (like in the N. American case). Worse, they mostly are oblong, ovals, not circles. A Harappan businessman using a cart with such wheels would have gotten seasick pretty soon. They are unfit for travel — and for the discerning reader’s consumption.

Instead, the rich Rigvedic materials dealing with the horse-drawn chariot and chariot races do not fit at all with Indus dates (2600-1900 BCE) and rather put this text and its chariots well after c. 2000 BCE, the archaeologically accepted timeframe of the invention of the spoke-wheeled chariot in the northern steppes and in the Near East. Again, Rajaram’s fantasised “Late Vedic” Indus people have scored a “first”: they invented the chariot long before archaeologists can find it anywhere on the planet!

• **“Aryan” Chariots**

There is no need to go deeply into his building up the straw man of Aryan invasions (i.e. immigration of speakers of Indo-Aryan), involving a need to “prove that the Vedas are of foreign origin.” No one today maintains such a theory anyhow. Instead, the Rigveda is a text of the Greater Punjab, indicating a lot of local acculturation but using a language and poetics that go back to the earlier Indo-Iranian period in Central Asia (c. 2000 BCE).

Equally misleading is his caricature: “without the horse and the spoke-wheel the Harappans were militarily vulnerable to the invading Aryan hordes who moved on speedy, horse-drawn chariots with spoke-wheels.” ... Nobody today claims that the Indo-Aryan speakers arrived on the scene when the mature Indus Civilisation still was flourishing and destroyed it, in whatever fashion. Instead, there is a gap of some centuries between the two cultures, as the descriptions of ruins and simple mud wall/palisade forts (pur) in the Rigveda indicate. Vedic texts tell us that the pastoralist Indo-Aryan nobility fought from chariots, and the commoners on horseback and on foot, with the local people (dasyu) of the small, post-Harappan settlements who, like the Kikata, are said not even to understand “the use of cows.” Next to warfare there also was peaceful acculturation of the various peoples in the Greater Punjab, as is shown by the Rigveda itself.

As for a chariot use, a brief study of ancient Near Eastern warfare would have done the ‘historian’ Rajaram some good. It is clear to even a superficial reader that after c. 1600 BCE the Hyksos,

Hittites, etc., used such chariots, not just for show and sport but also in battle, such as in the famous battle of Kadesh between the Hittites and Egyptians in 1300 BCE. Chariots were in fact used as late as in Alexander's battle with Poros (Paurava) in the Punjab, or by the contemporary Magadha army with its 3,000 elephants and 2,000 chariots. Why then all this diatribe about the "Aryan" use of chariots in favourable, flat terrain? (Not, of course, while "thundering down the Khyber Pass"!)

• **Foray into Linguistics**

Mercifully, Rajaram has spared us, this time, his usual assaults on the "pseudo-science" of linguistics, and instead tries his own hand at it, and teaches us some Dravidian: *kudirai* 'horse,' which should prove that the horse has been native to South India forever. However, his foray into linguistics is incomplete and misleading.

First, Tamil *kutirai*, Kannada *kudire*, Telugu *kudira*, etc. have been compared by linguists, decades ago, with ancient Near Eastern words: Elamite *kutira* 'bearer', *kuti* 'to bear.' The Drav. words Brahui (h)ullii 'horse' and Tam. *ivuLi* are derived from 'half-ass, hemion' (T. Burrow in 1972). Both words, far from being 'native South Indian', thus were coming in from the northwest.

Second, other Indian language families have such 'foreign' words as seen in Munda (Koraput) *kurtag*, (Korku) *gurgi*, *kurki*, (Sabara/Sora) *kurtaa*, (Gadaba) *krutaa*, which are all derived from Tibeto-Burmese, for example Tsangla (Bhutan) *kurtaa*, Tib. *rta*. We know that Himalayan ponies have always been brought southwards by salt traders and with them, of course, their names. There also is the independent and isolated Burushaski (in N. Pakistan) with *ha-ghur*, cf. Drav. *gur-* in Telugu *guRRamu*, Gondi *gurrām*, etc., and the Austro-Asiatic Khasi (in Shillong) *kulai*, Amwi *kurwa*, etc., — all of which again point to a northern origin.

Far from magically proving, with one Dravidian word, that the "native Indian horse" has been found in the South since times immemorial, the "man made theory" of linguistics — just as the hard facts of palaeontological science — rather indicate that the words for 'horse' were imported, along with the animal, from the (north)western (Iranian) and northern (Tibetan) areas. Genetics now add another facet. The domesticated horse seems to have several (steppe) maternal DNA lines which fits in very well with the several northern Eurasian words for it mentioned above. The Eastern Central Asian words must be added; they all probably derive from Proto-Altaiic **mori* (as in Mongolian *morin*, Chinese *ma*, Japanese *uma*, and as surprisingly also found in Irish *marc*, English *mare*).

• **The Harappan "Sarasvati"**

The case of the Vedic Sarasvati river (the modern Sarsuti-Ghagghar-Hakra) is complex and cannot be dealt with in detail. It must be pointed out, however, that the Rigvedic Sarasvati is a river on earth, a 'river' in the sky (Milky Way), and a goddess, and as such Sarasvati is described in superlative terms, once as flowing 'from the mountains to the sea' (*samudra*). However, this word has several meanings that must be kept apart: 'confluence, lake, mythical ocean surrounding the earth'; the sky, too, is called a 'pond'! To commingle all of this as *samudra* 'Indian Ocean' is bad philology.

In addition, far from emptying into the Rann of Kutch then, the Harappan Sarasvati ('having lakes'), disappears as Hakra in the dunes around and beyond Ft. Derawar in Bahawalpur, after showing signs of a delta (*playa*) and of terminal lakes, just like its Iranian namesake in the Afghani desert, the Haraxvaiti (Helmand) with its Hamun lakes.

Further, simple satellite photographs also do not show when a river dried up, as the Ghagghar-Hakra has indeed done several times in its different sections in recent millennia. This was shown in detail for the Indus and Vedic periods by the former director of Pakistani archaeology,

Rafique Mughal, in his book *Ancient Cholistan* (1997). Rajaram again is simply wrong as a scientist in asserting that the river conveniently “dried up completely by 1900 BC.” Reality is much more complex.

Actually, much of this has been known since Oldham and Raverty (1886, 1892). (Thus, I myself have printed a Sarasvati map, based on a lecture of 1983, before the over-quoted satellite photos of Yash Pal et al. were published in 1984). However, we need many more close observations such as Mughal’s, with archaeologically vouched dates for the individual settlements along the various sections and several courses of the river.

Finally, the “oceanic descriptions” of the Rigveda imagined by Rajaram and many other rewriters of history are based, again, on bad philology: their “data” are taken from Vedic mythology...! Or was Bhujyu abducted on another first, a Vedic airship?

– MICHAEL WITZEL

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languages like German and Greek, among others. At the same time, Sanskrit is also the result of incorporating some elements of Dravidian languages, which were very well established in India long before the Aryan migrations.

The ancient Vedic language of the Rg Veda was recorded first in Syria (not in India) in the Mitanni dynasty that reigned between 1500 and 1350 BCE in the Euphrates-Tigris basin.

The Indus Valley Civilization was a settled urban civilization while the Vedic period was characterized by pastoral nomadism. There is no mention of the Indus Valley cities in the Vedic (Aryan) texts.

MYTH: THE ARYAN /INVASION- theory is racist as it implies that Hinduism is a foreign import, not indigenous to India.

FACT: Undoubtedly, the Aryan Invasion Theory (originally) has its roots in a colonial genealogy; stemming from the 18th-19th Orientalist scholarship. This is a characteristic feature of most historical studies carried out at the time.

This claim is however just shallow scholarship. It emanates simply from the race of just “a few” scholars who have proposed it namely a few White “historians” who are avid proponents of the Theory that the Aryans are indigenous to India.

On the other hand, a number of highly-respected Indian academicians have also carried in-depth research to strengthen the existing theories. What is more relevant however that is the race of those proposing a theory by itself has little to do with the suggestion that the theory in itself is racist. “it is racist only if it furthers a certain agenda of proposing the interests of one race over another in order to maintain superiority...”⁷ But, how does the place of origin of the Aryans provide “any” superiority to “any” race? “ It does so “only” if the lens through which you are looking at history has already been severely distorted...” — via a warped outlook — “... if one believes that “...people who can trace their genealogy all the way to India have somehow more claims to its citizenship, than others whose genealogies can be traced to areas outside the current political boundaries. While this is a highly toxic claim or idea to promote anywhere, it must be however rejected outright.

To conclude, the application of population genetics to this “indigenous” method to make this claim simply does not have the temporal resolution to address questions about population movements in the time period that this issue is being appraised. “The error bars on these (papers) are in kilo years (1000 years) and hence cannot authoritatively suggest anything about the question of Aryans in the time frame of 3000 or so years ago, and are useful only determining the movements of people in pre-historic periods”⁷

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Next Issue:

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Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, D-1 Shivdham, 62 Link Road, Malad (W), Mumbai 400 064, INDIA
Phone : +91 22 2882 2850 & 2889 8662 **Fax**: +91 22 2889 8941
Email : vak@bom3.vsnl.net.in **Website** : www.vakindia.org

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