



## The Theory of Aryan Race and India: History and Politics

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ROMILA THAPAR\*

*The Theory of Aryan Race and India:  
History and Politics\*\**

The invention of an Aryan race in nineteenth century Europe was to have, as we all know, far-reaching consequences on world history. Its application to European societies culminated in the ideology of Nazi Germany. Another sequel was that it became foundational to the interpretation of early Indian history and there have been attempts at a literal application of the theory to Indian society. Some European scholars now describe it as a nineteenth century myth.<sup>1</sup> But some contemporary Indian political ideologies seem determined to renew its life. In this they are assisted by those who still carry the imprint of this nineteenth century theory and treat it as central to the question of Indian identity. With the widespread discussion on 'Aryan origins' in the print media and the controversy over its treatment in school textbooks, it has become the subject of a larger debate in terms of its ideological underpinnings rather than merely the differing readings among archaeologists and historians.

I intend to begin by briefly sketching the emergence of the theory in Europe, in which the search for the Indian past also played a role. I would like to continue with various Indian interpretations of the theory which have been significant to the creation of modern Indian identities and to nationalism. Finally, I would like to review the major archaeological and literary evidence which questions the historical interpretations of the theory and implicitly also its political role.<sup>2</sup>

It was initially both curiosity and the colonial requirement of knowledge about their subject peoples, that led the officers of the East India Company serving in India to explore the history and culture of the colony which they were governing. The time was the late eighteenth century. Not only had the

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awareness of new worlds entered the consciousness of Europe, but knowledge as an aspect of the Enlightenment was thought to provide access to power. Governing a colony involved familiarity with what had preceded the arrival of the colonial power on the Indian scene. The focus therefore was on languages, law and religion. The belief that history was essential to this knowledge was thwarted by the seeming absence of histories of early India. That the beginnings of Indian history would have to be rediscovered through European methods of historical scholarship, with an emphasis on chronology and sequential narrative, became the challenge.

These early explorations were dominated by the need to construct a chronology for the Indian past. Attempts were made to trace parallels with Biblical theories and chronology. But the exploration with the maximum potential lay in the study of languages and particularly Sanskrit. Similarities between Greek and Latin and Sanskrit, noticed even earlier, were clinched with William Jones' reading of Sandracottos as Candragupta. Two other developments took place. One was the suggestion of a monogenesis or single origin of all related languages, an idea which was extended to the speakers of the languages as well.<sup>3</sup> The second was the emergence of comparative philology, which aroused considerable interest, especially after the availability of Vedic texts in the early nineteenth century. Vedic studies were hospitably received in Europe where there was already both enthusiasm for or criticism of, Indian culture. German romanticism and the writings of Herder and Schlegel suggested that the roots of human history might go back to these early beginnings recorded in Sanskrit texts.<sup>4</sup> James Mill on the other hand, had a different view in his highly influential *History of British India*, where he described India as backward and stagnant and Hindu civilisation as inimical to progress.<sup>5</sup>

Comparative philologists, such as E. Burnouf and F. Bopp were primarily interested in the technicalities of language. Vedic Sanskrit, as the earliest form of Sanskrit, had primacy. Monogenesis was strengthened with the notion of an ancestral language, Indo-Germanic or Indo-European as it came to be called, as also in the origins of some European languages and their speakers being traced back to Iran and India or still further, to a central Asian homeland. Europe was on the edge of an Oriental Renaissance for it was believed that yet another Renaissance might follow, this time from the 'discovery' of the Orient, and thus taking knowledge into yet other directions.<sup>6</sup> The scholars associated with these studies and therefore with interpreting the Indian past, were generally based in Europe and had no direct experience of India.

The latter part of the nineteenth century witnessed discussions on the inter-relatedness of language, culture and race, and the notion of biological race came to the forefront.<sup>7</sup> The experience of imperialism where the European 'races' were viewed as advanced, and those of the colonised, as 'lesser breeds', reinforced these identities, as did social Darwinism.

Prominent among these identities was Aryan, used both for the language and the race, as current in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Aryan was derived from the Old Iranian *arya* used in the Zoroastrian text, the *Avesta*, and was a cognate of the Sanskrit *arya*. Gobineau, who attempted to identify the races of Europe as Aryan and non-Aryan with an intrusion of the Semitic, associated the Aryans with the sons of Noah but emphasised the superiority of the white race and was fearful about the bastardisation of this race.<sup>9</sup> The study of craniology which became important at this time began to question the wider identity of the Aryan. It was discovered that the speakers of Indo-European languages were represented by diverse skull types. This was in part responsible for a new turn to the theory in the suggestion that the European Aryans were distinct from the Asian Aryans.<sup>10</sup> The former were said to be indigenous to Europe while the latter had their homeland in Asia. If the European Aryans were indigenous to northern Europe then the Nordic blonde was the prototype Aryan. Such theories liberated the origins of European civilisation from being embedded in Biblical history. They also had the approval of rationalist groups opposed to the Church, and supportive of Enlightenment thinking.

The application of these ideas to Indian origins was strengthened by Max Mueller's work on Sanskrit and Vedic studies and in particular his editing of the *Rigveda* during the years from 1849 to 1874. He ascribed the importance of this study to his belief that the *Rigveda* was the most ancient literature of the world, providing evidence of the roots of Indo-Aryan and the key to Hinduism. Together with the *Avesta* it formed the earliest stratum of Indo-European.

Max Mueller maintained that there was an original Aryan homeland in central Asia. He postulated a small Aryan clan on a high elevation in central Asia, speaking a language which was not yet Sanskrit or Greek, a kind of proto-language ancestral to later Indo-European languages. From here and over the course of some centuries, it branched off in two directions; one came towards Europe and the other migrated to Iran, eventually splitting again with one segment invading north-western India.<sup>11</sup> The common origin of the Aryans was for him unquestioned.

The northern Aryans who are said to have migrated to Europe are described by Max Mueller as active and combative and they developed the idea of a nation, while the southern Aryans who migrated to Iran and to India were passive and meditative, concerned with religion and philosophy. This description is still quoted for the inhabitants of India and has even come to be a cliché in the minds of many.

The Aryans, according to Max Mueller were fair-complexioned Indo-European speakers who conquered the dark-skinned *dasas* of India. The *arya-varna* and the *dasa-varna* of the *Rigveda* were understood as two conflicting groups differentiated particularly by skin colour, but also by language and religious practice, which doubtless underlined the racial

interpretation of the terms. The Aryas developed Vedic Sanskrit as their language. The Dasas were the indigenous people, of Scythian origin, whom he called Turanians. The Aryan and the non-Aryan were segregated through the instituting of caste. The upper castes and particularly the *brahmanas* of modern times were said to be of Aryan descent and the lower castes and untouchables and tribes were descended from the Dasas. Max Mueller popularised the use of the term Aryan in the Indian context, arguing that it was originally a national name and later came to mean a person of good family. As was common in the nineteenth century, he used a number of words interchangeably such as Hindu and Indian, or race / nation / people / blood /—words whose meanings would today be carefully differentiated.

Having posited the idea of a common origin for the languages included as Indo-European and among which was Indo-Aryan, common origin was extended to the speakers of these languages. Aryan therefore, although specifically a label for a language, came to be used for a people and a race as well, the argument being that those who spoke the same language belonged to the same biological race. In a lecture delivered later at Strassburg in 1872, Max Mueller denied any link between language and race. In spite of this, he continued to confuse the two as is evident from his description of Raja Ram Mohan Roy in an Address delivered in 1883.

Ram Mohan Roy was an Arya belonging to the south-eastern branch of the Aryan race and he spoke an Aryan language, the Bengali. . . We recognise in Ram Mohan Roy's visit to England the meeting again of the two great branches of the Aryan race, after they had been separated so long that they had lost all recollection of their common origin, common language and common faith.<sup>12</sup>

The sliding from language to race became general to contemporary thinking. An equally erroneous equation was the identification of Dravidian languages with a Dravidian race.<sup>13</sup>

This reconstruction of what was believed to be Aryan history, supercedes the initial Orientalist search for Biblical parallels or connections with early Indian history. There was now a focus on common origins with Europe, untouched by the intervention of the Semitic peoples and languages. As an Aryan text the *Rigveda* is said to be free from any taint of Semitic contact. Nor do the *Puranas* which were significant to Orientalist reconstructions of the past, enter Max Mueller's discourse for whom they were not only later but were in comparison, second order knowledge. The *Puranas*, in their descriptions of the past, do not endorse an *arya-dasa* separation in a manner which could be interpreted as different races. There was also an exclusion of anything Islamic in Max Mueller's definition of the Indian. He refers to the tyranny of Mohammedan rule in India without explaining why he thought it was so.

The theory of Aryan race became endemic to the reconstruction of Indian history and the reasons for this are varied. The pre-eminence given to the role of the *brahmanas* in the Orientalist construction of Indology was endorsed by the centrality of the *Vedas*. The Aryan theory also provided the colonised with status and self-esteem, arguing that they were linguistically and racially of the same stock as the colonisers. However, the separation of the European Aryans from the Asian Aryans was in effect a denial of this status. Such a denial was necessary in the view of those who proposed a radical structuring of colonial society through new legislation and administration, and in accordance with the conversion of the colony into a viable source of revenue. The complexities of caste were simplified in its being explained as racial segregation, demarcating the Aryans from the others.<sup>14</sup> And finally, it made Indian origins relevant to the current perceptions dominating European thought and these perceptions were believed to be 'scientific' explanations.

Max Mueller's books were read in India and his views were endorsed in various influential publications, such as John Muir's *Original Sanskrit Texts*, (1858–1863), and John Wilson's *Indian Caste* (1877). Both authors were Christian missionaries and drew attention to the plight of the low castes, oppressed by *brahmanas*, an oppression which they claimed went back to the Aryan invasions. They referred to the conflict of the *arya* with the non-aryas. The term *arya* was used as a patronymic referring to the Aryan people. They launched an attack on the inequities of caste and therefore of Hinduism and maintained that Christianity alone could bring these to an end.

Missionary views in the later half of the nineteenth century were familiar to many Indians. Among these, Jyotiba Phule provided a radical exposition of the Aryan theory. He viewed caste relations as relations of inequality, where society had been divided into a hierarchy of ranked castes. By emphasising the importance of the non-Aryans he used the theory of Aryan race to argue a different origin and status for the lower castes. Referred to as the *dasas* and the *shudras* in brahmanical texts, the lower castes were, according to him, the indigenous people. They were the rightful inheritors of the land, whose rights had been wrongfully appropriated by the invading Aryans, and who had subjugated them and reduced them to a lower caste status.<sup>15</sup> The immediate context was for him the recent Peshwa rule in western India and the confrontation between the *brahmanas* and the non-*brahmanas*. The *brahmanas* were Aryan and therefore alien and the indigenous peoples were the *shudras* and others, whom he labelled as *kshatriyas*. The argument ran that the golden age was prior to the invasion of the Aryans when King Bali ruled and what are now the lower castes were then in the ascendant. The invasion of the Aryans was crucial to the creation of segregated groups in the form of castes, where the Aryans were the victorious aliens who kept the indigenous people permanently subordinated.

He used to good effect the well-known myth of the *brahmana* Parashurama destroying the *kshatriyas*, in this construction of the past. Phule's radicalisation of the theory was popular among the lower castes and became central to many non-Brahmin movements in other parts of peninsular India. By stating that the upper castes were not indigenous, the theory was used to exclude the upper caste dominated middle class claiming an Aryan identity. From Phule's perspective, the theory endorsed a confrontation of castes.

The upper-castes had their own use for the theory and it was again given a twist which suited their social aspirations and political needs. The views of Phule were generally ignored. The theory was used to argue the superiority of the upper castes and promote their self-esteem by maintaining that not only were the upper-castes the lineal descendents of the Aryans but that they were also racially related to the European Aryan. Keshab Chunder Sen follows Max Mueller and John Wilson in his statement that, '... in the advent of the English nation in India we see a reunion of parted cousins, the descendants of two different families of the ancient Aryan race.'<sup>16</sup> B.G. Tilak endorsed the antiquity of the *Rigveda* by taking it back to 4500 BC, much earlier than the 1500 BC suggested by Max Muller, basing his argument on what he interpreted as references to planetary positions.<sup>17</sup> Influenced by the theory of a Nordic homeland for the Aryans, Tilak suggested that they had migrated from the Arctic regions in the post-glacial age and then branched off, with one group going to Europe and the other coming to India.<sup>18</sup> The European Aryans according to him relapsed into barbarism but the Indian Aryans retained their original, superior civilisation which they re-established on conquering the non-Aryans of India. The introduction of geology into the argument was also seen as supporting an early date for the *Rigveda*.<sup>19</sup> Tilak's views were known to Max Mueller who of course did not agree with him but was incidentally, helpful in getting Tilak released from jail when he was incarcerated for nationalist activities.

Dayananda Sarasvati, seeking to return to the social and religious life of the *Vedas*, used the Vedic corpus as the blueprint of his vision of Indian society.<sup>20</sup> But he argued that the *Vedas* are the source of all knowledge including modern science, a view with which Max Mueller disagreed. He underlined the linguistic and racial purity of the Aryans and the organisation which he founded, the Arya Samaj, was described by its followers as 'the society of the Aryan race'. The Aryas were the upper castes and the untouchables were excluded. The innovation, or according to some the revival, of, ritual called *shuddhi* or purification made it possible for those converted to other religions to be accepted back as caste Hindus. The same ritual, but with less frequency, was also used to 'purify' those outside caste, into being given a caste status. For Dayananda, it was said, castes were merely different professions or guilds established by the state and therefore the *de jure* status could change. A change in the *de facto* status had to be ordered by the state or by society regulating itself.<sup>21</sup> This was his reply to the criticism

that he wanted to retain caste as practiced in the *Vedas*, despite its being projected as a rigid system in the *Sutra* texts.

These views coincided with the emergence of nationalism in the late nineteenth century in India, articulated mainly by the middle class, which was drawn from the upper caste and was seeking both legitimacy and an identity from the past. Origins therefore became crucial. To legitimise the status of this middle class, its superior Aryan origins and lineal descent was emphasised. It was assumed that only the upper caste Hindu could claim Aryan ancestry. This effectively excluded not only the lower castes but also the non-Hindus, even those of some social standing. Aryanism therefore became an exclusive status. In the dialogue between the early nationalists and the colonial power, a theory of common origins strengthening a possible link between the colonisers and the Indian elite came in very useful. For early nationalism, Aryan and non-Aryan differentiation was of an ethnic and racial kind, but was also beginning to touch implicitly on class differentiation.

Sympathetic to nationalism in India were the views of the Theosophical Society which changed the theory to suit its own premises. A prominent member of the Society, Col. Olcott<sup>22</sup> maintained that not only were the Aryans (equated with the Hindus) indigenous to India but that they were also the progenitors of European civilisation. Theosophical views emerged out of what was believed to be an aura of oriental religions and particularly Hinduism, as also the supposed dichotomy between the spiritualism of India and the materialism of Europe. The romanticising of India included viewing its civilisation as providing a counter-point to an industrialising Europe obsessed with rationalism, both of which were seen as eroding the European quality of life.

The theosophical reading of the Aryan theory was echoed in the interpretation of the theory by Hindu nationalist opinion. A group of people, close to and involved with the founding of the R.S.S. (Rashtriya Svayamsevaka Sangha) and writing in the early twentieth century, developed the concept of Hindutva or Hinduness and argued that this was essential to the identity of the Indian.<sup>23</sup> Since Hinduness in the past did not have a specific definition, the essentials of a Hindu identity had to be formulated. The argument ran that the original Hindus were the Aryans, a distinctive people indigenous to India. Caste Hindus or Hindu Aryas are their descendents. There was no Aryan invasion since the Aryans were indigenous to India and therefore no confrontation among the people of India. The Aryans spoke Sanskrit and were responsible for the spread of Aryan civilisation from India to the west. Confrontations came with the arrival of foreigners such as the Muslims, the Christians and more recently, the Communists. These groups are alien because India is neither the *pitribhumi*—the land of their birth—the assumption being that all Muslims and Christians are from outside India, nor the *punyabhumi*—their holy land. Hindu Aryas



have had to constantly battle against these foreigners. Influenced by European theories of race of the 1920's and 1930's, parallels were drawn between the European differentiation of Aryans and Semites with the Indian differentiation of Hindus and Muslims. Justifying the treatment of the Jews in Germany, the threat of the same fate was held out to the Muslims in India.

The Hindutva version of the theory became a mechanism for excluding some sections of Indian society, specifically Indian Muslims and Christians, by insisting that they are alien. Inevitably it also ran into problems with the lower castes and the untouchables, who propagated Jyotiba Phule's view. There was a certain ambiguity among the Hindutva group as to whether or not the untouchables were Hindus and therefore Aryans. This posed the problem that if only caste Hindus are Aryans then the untouchables would have to be excluded, and this reduces the numerical count of Hindus; whereas, if the lower castes and Dalits are included as Hindus, then although this may upset some caste Hindus nevertheless the numbers listed as Hindu increases the Hindu constitution of the majority. The question of numbers also influenced the insistence that the Aryans are indigenous and not invaders. Such an increase in numbers is important to political mobilisation and to the assertion that since Hindus constitute the majority in India, it should be declared a Hindu state. The identity and origins of the Hindus was seen as crucial to the identity of the nation of the Hindus and of the nation-state. From this perspective, it is emphasised that the national identity has to focus on the antiquity and continuity of the Hindu Arya as the major component of the Hindu nation. This inevitably brings historians and archaeologists into a debate which is at one level about history but also touches on questions of political ideologies and national identities.

Mainstream historians writing on ancient India did not accept the Hindutva version of the theory. Going back to the views of Max Mueller they began their narrative with the coming of the invading Aryans. The *Vedas* therefore came to be seen as the foundational texts of Indian civilisation. With the growing influence of nationalism in the writing of Indian history, Max Mueller was seen as sympathetic and positive in his reading of the Indian past. The idyllic Indian lost in philosophic speculation could have been viewed as a condescending image, but in fact was appreciated. Indian historians were themselves largely from the upper castes and not averse to the highlighting of their own status. The acceptance of the Aryan theory underlined the Hindu idiom in nationalist historical writing. The Aryans were eulogised for laying the foundation of a civilisation thought to be at least equal, if not superior, to most others.

The discussion on caste as we have seen, also incorporated the Aryan theory. Caste as racial segregation, separating the upper caste Aryans from the lower caste non-Aryans, was viewed as a scientific way of organising society in keeping with modern ideas, but this view was gradually discarded when there was evidence to the contrary. The Christian missionary criticism

of caste was partially conceded by referring to the extreme rigidity of caste. This became a way of explaining the weakness of Indian society, particularly in its confrontation with Islam and 'in the face of Muslim invasions', for it was said that caste was divisive and the Hindus could not unite to meet the threat. But it was also argued that caste saved Hinduism from being absorbed into other religions such as Islam and helped maintain its continuing identity. There were only a very few analyses where caste was seen to have its own history of change and adaptation. Moralising on the evils of caste precluded the need to see it as an agency of power, dominance and subordination, or to recognise the large area of flexible negotiation which, to some degree, permitted certain castes to shape their status. For example, families of obscure origin and some even said to be of the lower castes, rose to political power and many legitimised their power by successfully claiming upper caste *kshatriya* status.<sup>24</sup> To concede these facts would have contradicted the theory that the upper castes are the lineal descendants of the Aryans.

This varied exploitation of the theory received a jolt with the archaeological discovery of the Indus civilisation. The excavation of the sites of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro in the 1920's and subsequent excavations in India and Pakistan, revealing an extensive urban culture in the northern and western parts of the Indian subcontinent, created problems for the Aryan theory. Being predominantly urban, the Indus culture is distinctively different from the pastoral-agrarian society described in the Vedic texts.<sup>25</sup> The *Vedas* are primarily ritual texts and their depiction of society is ancillary to their main purpose. The archaeological evidence, more specific on data relating to the environment, technology and economy, covers a much wider area and goes further back in time. It has become therefore the primary data for the reconstruction of the earliest history of India. But because the Vedic texts were used in reconstructing the past, prior to the availability of archaeological evidence, there is a readiness to read the archaeological data in the light of the literary.<sup>26</sup>

The nature of the literary data is significant to the historical reconstruction of this period. It is virtually impossible to date the Vedic texts with precision since they are essentially ritual texts and in some passages are clearly anachronistic.<sup>27</sup> They are composed in the language of ritual and require explanatory and etymological commentaries. Among those surviving is the *Nirukta* of Yaska, generally dated to 700–600 BC. Panini in his grammar differentiates between the language of ritual and the spoken language.<sup>28</sup> The compositions were preserved orally for many centuries through careful methods of memorising. However, the question has been raised as to whether the systems of memorisation were fixed prior to the compilation of the hymns, and further whether this was also prior to the adoption of a script. On this opinions differ. A long period of a few centuries intervened between the composition of the earliest hymns and their compilation into the *Rigveda* as we know it. Even within a strictly monitored oral tradition

there can be changes and if the memorisation extends over some centuries, then some degree of additions and subtractions may be expected. The use of astronomy in dating an entire text is regarded as unreliable since the references to planetary positions could have been incorporated from an earlier tradition which need not have been Vedic but was known in the area where the hymns were composed.

The *Rigveda* has been approximately dated to about 1500 BC by when the Indus cities had declined. Therefore in accordance with this chronology, the Indus civilisation was prior to the Vedic culture and precedes it as foundational to Indian civilisation. If however there is an insistence on 4500 BC as the date of the *Rigveda*, (which is unlikely on the basis of linguistic evidence), then the Vedic would precede the Harappan culture. Excavations in Baluchistan indicate that some settlements there go back to the seventh millennium and continue to the first millennium<sup>29</sup> thus vastly preceding even the early date which some have proposed for the *Rigveda*. But the pre-Harappan cultures of these sites are not present at the same date in the sites of the Punjab and the north-western borderlands of the Indian subcontinent, which is the location of the *Rigveda*. It is difficult to find an archaeological counter-part among the pre-Harappan settlements to the material culture as described in the *Rigveda*. The mutation to the pattern of the Harappan culture takes place at approximately the same period in both areas.

Pre-Harappan cultures in the areas where eventually the Harappa culture prevailed, are of diverse kinds and distinctively different. The Ghaggar-Hakra river system which some have sought to identify with the Rigvedic Sarasvati and are projecting it as the nucleus of what evolved into the Harappa culture, has a large number of sites but these cannot be regarded as the sole precursors to Harappan urbanisation. The contribution of the sites in the Indo-Iranian borderlands and in Baluchistan as also in the Indus system itself, appear to be more significant. The Harappan sites, although not entirely uniform, do maintain a pattern which is not only recognisable but marks a departure from the earlier cultures. Its major characteristics are the emphasis on an urban pattern with towns laid out on a grid and a rationalisation of streets in terms of direction and size, with an extensive drainage system, distinctive domestic and public buildings, artefacts such as seals and weights and measures associated with developed exchange, a variety of crafts and distinctive pottery. This was a motivated reaching out into a wide area through various networks of settlements. The requirement of manpower and the exploitation of resources was on a scale unfamiliar to preceding cultures. The sheer size of the area tapped by the Harappan culture led inevitably to some degree of regional variation.

The Late Harappan phase, from the early to mid-second millennium BC when the Mature Harappan began to decline, sees a return to a stronger regional articulation and a diversity in archaeological cultures which are

geographically delimited. Once again there are a variety of cultures which emerge at this time, some with no ostensible links with other regions, some with continuities with the Harappan and some with evidence of the arrival of innovations from elsewhere. Settlements in Baluchistan suggest links with central Asia and Iran in the second millennium BC. Interestingly the overlap between the Late Harappan and a subsequent independent culture—that of the Painted Grey Ware—occurs in Punjab and Haryana. With the decline of the cities there appears to have been a ruralisation in the regions earlier associated with the Harappan culture, since it takes a few centuries before another urbanisation is witnessed and this time in the Ganga valley.

Rigvedic references to the grassy banks of the Sarasvati would predate the hydrological changes which led to the drying up of the Sarasvati just prior to about 1000 BC. The geographical location of the Rigvedic *saptasindhu* is generally taken to be the Punjab and the adjoining borderlands, although some scholars would place the geographical location of the *Rigveda* closer to central Asia and Afghanistan.<sup>30</sup> There is virtually no familiarity in the Rigvedic hymns with Sindh and Baluchistan, leave alone Gujarat (all these being areas where Harappan settlements have been found), nor with the middle Ganga valley. The last is part of the geography of the later Vedic corpus, when interestingly, the language of the north is described as superior. Thus the Punjab could have been the geographical overlap between a part of the area of the Harappan culture and the *Rigveda*.

Although the earlier notion of a systematic destruction of Harappan sites by Aryan invaders has been questioned from the evidence of archaeology, this does not allow us to maintain that the speakers of Indo-Aryan were therefore indigenous to India. Nor does the evidence support the identification of Vedic culture with the Indus/Harappan culture. That Indo-Aryan has cognates in a few words that occur in texts from Iran, Turkey and Syria, and that the links with Old Iranian suggest more than just a linguistic affinity, is well-established. Parallels from Iran occur in rituals, deities and social forms, but these were not imports from India as is also suggested by the deliberate reversal of some associated ideas in the two societies. The cult of *soma/haoma* and the emphasis on the worship of fire were common to Iran and India. The cult of *soma* does not occur elsewhere in the Indo-European speaking world suggesting a particularly close relationship of the Indo-Iranian culture, if not a common source. The ritual of *soma* has also been linked to some proto-type shamanistic rituals from earlier periods in Central Asia. The Indo-Iranian links tie into the chronology of the *Rigveda* since the earliest suggested date now for Zoroaster is *circa* 1200 BC.<sup>31</sup> There is also no evidence of a linguistic movement from India to Iran. The Vedic texts indicate to the contrary, that Indo-Aryan moved eastwards from north-western India to the Ganga valley. The problem for the historian then is to try and understand the mechanism by which Indo-

Aryan was brought and adopted in India. For this it is necessary to go back a little in time and observe activities in west Asia and Iran since these are closely connected with events in North India.

Archaeological evidence from the third millennium BC confirms wide-ranging, overland contacts between north-western India, southern and eastern Iran and the Oxus region, and maritime contacts with Oman and Mesopotamia.<sup>32</sup> It was clearly a cosmopolitan world with people on the move, making languages mobile too. Traders from the Indus cities would have had to use diverse languages such as Akkadian, Elamite, and possibly Indo-European in the upper Oxus. This further complicates the decipherment of the Indus script, which so far has been divided between two main schools, one reading it as Indo-Aryan and the other as Proto-Dravidian, where the latter reading seems to be based on a greater reliance on the rules of linguistics.<sup>33</sup> One attempt however which remains controversial among linguists is the close connection which has been suggested between Elamite in southern Iran and Proto-Dravidian. The proto-Elamite script suggests comparison with the Harappan and it was being used in eastern Iran. Elamite was the language known in the area lying between the Harappan culture and Mesopotamia, prior to the arrival of Old Iranian when Indo-European place-names and proper names start being mentioned in cuneiform documents from northern Mesopotamia in the Second millennium BC.<sup>34</sup> This would also tie-in with the interaction in the area suggested by the archaeological evidence.

The decline of the Indus cities in the early second millennium BC is now attributed to environmental changes, the closing of trade with the Gulf and the collapse of political authority in the cities. However, the decline of the cities is not an abrupt termination of the Indus civilisation as there is some continuity of Harappan traits in post-Harappan cultures and an overlap at some sites in Punjab and Haryana. In relation to cultural traits from Iran and central Asia, the possibilities of small-scale migrations into India and the interaction of peoples and cultures over a long period of time, can be assumed. The emphasis is both on smallness and long duration as there was no massive migration such as to overwhelm the existing cultures. This is also much more likely to have been the mechanism by which the Indo-Aryan language came to be established in north-western India.

If the archaeological evidence is given primacy in establishing the roots of Indian civilisation then it is possible to reconstruct a picture of the evolution of various societies in the northern and western parts of the sub-continent. In this reconstruction, the Indus civilisation/Harappan culture, is a significant landmark and interest is shifting away from futile attempts to identify every new archaeological culture with the Aryans. A close examination of the archaeological evidence in various dimensions permits a comparison of Harappan society with that depicted in the Vedic

texts and the two are diverse. The one characteristic which is striking in the archaeology of the Harappan culture is the strength of the urban organisation, reflected in the way the towns were planned and the amenities provided. Urban centres were central to extensive trade in Harappan life, whereas the Vedic society was pastoral and agricultural without descriptions of urban living. There are no references to granaries or large-scale storage systems under administrative authority. Craft production which was an established feature of the Harappan cities is mentioned in passing in the texts. The use of a script is evident from the seals but is absent in the texts. Vedic society gradually becomes more familiar with the use of iron and this is absent in the Harappan culture where the metal technology is of copper and bronze. Other technologies also point to major differences, as for example, the *raja* in the Vedic texts was equipped with a chariot run on spoked wheels neither of which are to be found at Harappan sites where oxen drew carts and the wheels were discoid. Chariots were drawn by horses but these are late arrivals and there is sporadic evidence of the horse at the time of the decline of the cities.

Despite these differences, an alternative view is being propagated. This interpretation seeks an unbroken genealogy for the Hindu as Arya and therefore supports the Hindutva reconstruction of events. The argument runs as follows: the Indus civilisation is said to be Vedic and Aryan and this, together with the lack of evidence of a large-scale Aryan invasion from archaeology, is said to further prove that there were people who called themselves the Aryans and who were indigenous to India.<sup>35</sup> The preferred date for the *Rigveda* is 4500 BC so that it precedes the Indus cities, but the two can also be made to coincide chronologically.<sup>36</sup> It is claimed that the Indo-Aryan language originated in India and spread from India westwards.

Such an early date for the *Rigveda* is untenable on the available linguistic evidence nor is there support for the argument of a westward flow of people from northern India, neither from linguistic nor from archaeological sources. Since language cannot be identified by an archaeological culture, the use of the term Aryan in this interpretation refers to a combination of people, culture and language, rather than strictly only to language. We are back once more to Max Mueller's confusion over language and race. The attempt to push back the chronology of the *Rigveda* is accompanied by the attempt to take the Harappan culture back to the fourth millennium or even earlier and the equating of the Harappan culture with the Vedic texts. There is a focus on those pre-Harappan cultures whose location is along the Ghaggar-Hakra which is identified with the now invisible Sarasvati river, important to the *Rigveda*. It is argued that the number of sites along the Ghaggar-Hakra river system is greater than along the Indus, therefore the former should be seen as the nucleus of the Harappan culture. The claim is then made that the Indus civilisation should more correctly be called the Indus-Sarasvati civilisation.<sup>37</sup>

This theory ignores the existence of a variety of pre-Harappan cultures in other areas, some of which were closely related to the process of Harappan urbanisation. It has also been contested by some archaeologists who disagree with the count and location of sites as with the implicit argument of what constitutes the nucleus of a civilisation. However, there are ideological and political dimensions to this theory which make it acceptable to those seeking origins in what they call indigenous identities. The equating of the Harappan and Vedic culture is not essentially an attempt at co-relating archaeological and literary sources in reconstructing the beginnings of the history of the subcontinent. There are other agendas which are being addressed in this attempt. If it can be argued that the Harappan culture is in fact Vedic or that the *Rigveda* is earlier even than the Harappan, then the *Vedas* continue to be foundational to the sub-continental civilisation of South Asia and also attract the encomium of representing an advanced civilisation, superior even to the pastoral-agrarian culture actually described in the Vedic texts. The Vedic culture then, has an unbroken flow, as it were, from the fourth millennium into the historical period, and in terms of the antiquity of civilisations (which was a nineteenth century obsession), places it on par with the earliest. The Sanskritic base of the civilisation is sought to be established by reading the Vedic into the Harappan. The label Indus-Sarasvati civilisation evokes the *Rigveda*.

There is also in this interpretation, the advantage that an extensive territory can be claimed for the Vedic culture, since Harappan artefacts and sites are located in a widespread area from Badakshan in Afghanistan to northern Maharashtra and from the Ganga-Yamuna doab to Baluchistan. This vastly extends the geographical area as described in the *Rigveda* and which is much more limited. The discovery of Harappan sites on the Indian side of the border between India and Pakistan, is viewed as compensating for the loss of the cities of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa which are located in Pakistan. By insisting on the Ghaggar-Hakra being the cradle of the Indus civilisation, there is an element of recapturing the civilisation for India. The equation of the Harappan with the Vedic strengthens the notion of an unbroken Hindu Aryan origin for the historical beginnings of both India and Pakistan.

Another curious agenda is that of what is described as 'a critical mass' of Indians and a few others in America and Canada who refer to themselves as the Indo-American school (as against what they call the Indo-European school of scholars who work within the earlier Indian and European scholarship). The Indo-American school, according to one of its prominent spokesmen, consists of predominantly American-trained professional scientists researching on ancient India (presumably as a hobby), and using the resources of modern science and technology.<sup>38</sup> Obviously well-endowed, they run their own journal from their main office in Canada. They too are committed to proving that the Vedic and the Harappan cultures are the

same and that their antiquity goes back to the fifth millennium BC and therefore the Aryans are indigenous to India and took the Aryan mission westwards from India. Much of their writing contributes to the invention of yet more methodologies about a complex subject. What is striking about their publications is their evident unfamiliarity with the methods of analysing archaeological, linguistic and historical data. Consequently their writings read rather like nineteenth century tracts but peppered with references to using the computer so as to suggest scientific objectivity since they claim that it is value-free. Those that question their theories are dismissed as Marxists! That Indian scientists in America should take upon themselves the task of proving the Harappan to be Vedic, to having influenced other civilisations such as the Egyptian, and to proving that the Aryans proceeded on a civilising mission issuing out of India and going westwards, can only suggest that the 'Indo-American school' is in the midst of an identity crisis in its new environment. It is anxious to demarcate itself from other immigrants and to proclaim that the Indian identity is superior to the others who have also fallen into the 'great melting-pot'.

These reconstructions disregard the linguistic data, probably because it would puncture their argument. It is conveniently stated that the linguistic models arise out of political and cultural factors and presumably therefore may be ignored. Yet linguistics introduces another dimension, other than archaeological, which has a considerable bearing not only on the nature of the Vedic language but also on the reconstruction of the history of this period. Linguistic analyses, subsequent to Max Mueller and particularly those of the last few decades have led to the radical revision of many earlier views. The internal evidence of the Vedic texts points to Indo-Aryan travelling eastwards from north-western India to the middle Ganga valley. The *Rigveda* has its location in the *saptasindhu* region, but the later Vedic corpus indicates a shift eastwards and the crossing of the river Sadanira/Gandak is specifically mentioned. Changes are apparent within the evolution of Vedic Sanskrit from the period of the *Rigveda* to that of the later *Vedas*.<sup>39</sup> There is also a greater incidence of non-Aryan linguistic elements in the later Vedic corpus as compared to the *Rigveda*. There is therefore an induction into Vedic Sanskrit from Indian non-Aryan languages registering an increase over time, and thus suggesting that Indo-Aryan was not indigenous. The recent linguistic analysis therefore is set aside by those who argue to the contrary.

Yet the linguistic evidence cannot be ignored as it forms part of a primary source—the Vedic texts—in the reconstruction of the history of this period. But this evidence has also to be seen in a wider context. Related languages, constituting what is called the Indo-European family are said to go back to an ancestral language spoken in the Indo-European homeland which has generally been located in central Asia and which is referred to as Proto-Indo-European.<sup>40</sup> Such reconstructions previously assumed that a proto



form could be arrived at from words taken from later texts. This has been questioned and historical linguistics is now particular about possible changes in the history of words. Linguistics also places an emphasis on the structure of the language and does not limit itself to comparing similar sounding words.

A single homeland would imply a widespread diffusion from a small area, and the explanations for such a diffusion have been speculative. The drying up of the pasture lands in the steppe area has been suggested. In central Asia settlements tend to acquire simple fortifications in the third millennium BC perhaps indicating a more than normal movement of people. An alternative reconstruction might suggest that there was a wide belt of Indo-European speaking peoples inhabiting a large part of central Asia, from the Tocharian speaking region to the Slavonic. These would have moved in different directions and associated with a variety of pre-existing cultures, thus resulting in some similarities among Indo-European languages but with variant characteristics as well, the latter deriving from pre-existing languages. This would involve some variation in the ancestral languages and a wider spectrum of migrations and movements of peoples. The languages taken to new areas would have changed to some degree on coming into contact with non-Indo-European speakers and the establishing of languages related to Indo-European would have taken a few centuries. The imprint of Indo-European would vary from the maximum impact, namely that of gradually establishing an Indo-European language in the area, to the minimum, namely, that of the local language merely incorporating a few Indo-European words. Given the inter-relatedness of Indo-European languages and that these languages in contiguous areas have historical roots which are often connected, it is not possible to study the history of any single Indo-European language in isolation. Each has to be viewed in the context of the group with which it is associated. Thus Indo-Aryan has to be examined within the context of links with old Iranian and a possible Indo-Iranian phase at an earlier stage.

Some clarification in the use of these terms is necessary. Indo-Iranian descended from an original Indo-European would have preceded the division into Old Iranian and Indo-Aryan. The early sections of the *Avesta*, associated with Zoroaster provide evidence of Old Iranian. Indo-Aryan is available from the *Rigveda* onwards. However, there is another form which some scholars identify with Indo-Aryan and which they argue is perhaps a little earlier and therefore it is called Proto-Indo-Aryan. This would make it possibly earlier than the *Rigveda*. Its occurrence is not in south Asia or Iran, but in a few inscriptions from Turkey and Syria. There is however, no evidence of an Indo-Aryan language acting as a connecting link from an earlier location in south Asia towards the area to the west. Furthermore, these inscriptions are firmly dated to the second millennium BC and this has some relevance for dating the *Rigveda*.

The term 'Aryan' in the label Indo-Aryan, refers solely to the language and not to the people who spoke it or for that matter to any imagined race. The word *airya* in the *Avesta* is seen as the same as the *arya* of the *Rigveda*. Its etymology has been discussed at length and has been read as derived from meanings such as companion, enemy-friend, stranger, guest, a person of noble lineage or a person of status and possessions.<sup>41</sup> The inscriptions of the Achaemenid kings of Iran are also quoted where they identify themselves as descended from *aryas*.<sup>42</sup> But the earliest of these inscriptions are of the sixth century BC and therefore much later than the *Avesta*. Although the term has been associated with descent, it can also be read as referring to nobility of status. Since Indo-Aryan refers to a language and *arya* refers to a social status, attempts to identify either with archaeological cultures tend to be meaningless.

Cultural similarities recognised in the various Indo-European languages have given rise to theories concerning the organisation of the societies which use Indo-European. Of these the most influential is that of Dumezil who describes the tripartite function of Indo-European society as consisting of three categories—priests, warriors and hereditary-cultivators.<sup>43</sup> However, it has been shown that these divisions are so general that they can even be seen in non-Indo-European literatures such as the Bible.<sup>44</sup> A similarity of patterns and their traces have also been sought in the mythology and laws of Indo-European speaking societies.<sup>45</sup> The assumption that the speakers of Indo-European became the dominant group in the areas where the language spread, has now been superseded by the recognition that the diffusion of a language introduces some new ideas and institutions in an area, but that frequently there is a restructuring of existing ideas and institutions.

Tentative suggestions from this perspective have been made in relation to rituals. Some rituals characteristic of the Indo-Iranian area are not practised in other areas where Indo-European is spoken. This may be because of the close connections between north-western India and Iran, even prior to the establishing of Indo-European language in the region. One such ritual is the cult of *soma* (in Indo-Aryan) or *haoma* (in Old Iranian), which involves the consuming of the elaborately prepared juice of a plant with hallucinogenic properties as part of major sacrificial rituals. It has been thought that the tradition goes back to shamanistic practices in central Asia. The plant has been identified with either the ephedra, found in a ritual context at the site of Togolok 21 in Margiana (Turkmenistan) or else with the fly agaric, a mushroom which grows in a habitat associated with mountains of Afghanistan.<sup>46</sup> The geographical restriction of the cult may have arisen because the plant was specific to a limited location. A tentative hypothesis takes the cult back to the Harappans.<sup>47</sup> The argument is not that the Harappans therefore were the people of the *Vedas*, but that this cult had pre-Vedic and pre-Avestan origins and was incorporated into the Vedic and Avestan ritual. This underlines the need to examine how a ritual is constituted,

and the extent to which it retains archaic features and introduces new ones.

The earliest definitive evidence of Indo-European, apart from a few names in Mesopotamian sources of the nineteenth century BC comes from Hittite and Mitanni inscriptions from Turkey and Syria in the period between about 1750 to 1300 BC and from the names of the Kassites whose short-lived presence in Mesopotamia is dated to the mid-second millennium BC. These data are not texts in Indo-European, but words ; names of deities and rulers, and terms used in the training of horses.<sup>48</sup> The occurrence of Indo-European words is striking in an area which was non-Indo-European speaking prior to this and reverted to the same after this brief intrusion.<sup>49</sup> This does not indicate large numbers of Indo-European speakers, nor a substantial local population taking to the new language. That this form of Indo-European is close to Rigvedic Sanskrit has tended to endorse the date of about 1500–1200 BC for the early hymns of the *Rigveda*. Linguistic evidence of language or words close to Vedic Sanskrit prior to the second millennium BC in the area between the Indus and Turkey, is not forthcoming. This is also the period when the earlier connections between the Indus and west Asia begin to decline. In the absence of language links in the intervening area, it has been suggested that Proto-Indo-Aryan may have travelled originally from a more central point, perhaps in Iran, westwards to Turkey and eastwards to northern India.<sup>50</sup> Avestan references to the migrations of the *arya* mention places in northern and Eastern Iran and the direction would appear to be from the north to the north-east.

The assimilation of non-Aryan linguistic elements into Vedic Sanskrit<sup>51</sup> raises the question of whether there was bilingualism between the speakers of Indo-Aryan and of other languages, and if so, then to what degree; and who were the authors of these texts? It could be that groups of migrants over many centuries came from the region of Margiana and Bactria to north-western India.<sup>52</sup> The migrants could have been slow-moving pastoralists, who also functioned as itinerant traders. This is suggested by the centrality of pastoral society in the *Rigveda*. They probably settled in places en route, so that those who entered India were already ethnically and culturally mixed and spoke what evolved into Indo-Aryan carrying traces of closeness to Old Iranian, but nevertheless distinct. It would have been more convenient for them to use local artefacts rather than carry items from their earlier settlements. Archaeology therefore would register their presence in indirect forms and not as a major change in material culture. They would have met with non-Aryan speakers in India, using Proto-Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic and possibly in some areas even Tibeto-Burman. Bilingualism would have followed, resulting in the induction of non-Aryan traits into Aryan, recognisable in morphology (word formation), phonology (sound), syntax (sentence pattern and grammar), lexical items (vocabulary) and semantics (meaning). Non-Aryan speakers were part of this bilingualism and over

many centuries may have become proficient in Indo-Aryan.<sup>53</sup> Apart from elements of language, it is likely that custom and ritual were also incorporated into Vedic practice, amalgamating cultural items from local and distant traditions. This would result in some anachronisms. Bilingualism would have been a necessity. But the motivation for the adoption of Indo-Aryan by non-Aryan speakers may have been encouraged if the language being adopted gave access to artefacts, rituals, status and security.<sup>54</sup>

In order to strengthen this hypothesis, it would be necessary to examine the artefacts which are innovatory towards the early first millennium BC. Was the increasing use of the horse and the spoked-wheel chariot linked to the Aryan speakers? Or the introduction of iron artefacts?<sup>55</sup> The horse is an insignificant animal in the Indus cities and can be said to arrive, at the earliest, towards the decline of the cities and not before the second millennium BC.<sup>56</sup> It is noticeably absent in any ritual context such as a depiction on a Harappan seal or at places thought to be associated with rituals. This is in contrast to its presence in some post-Harappan cultures and its centrality to Vedic ritual and life. This centrality was probably because the horse, and certainly the quality livestock, was imported even in later times from central Asia or from Arabia.

The use of the horse and of the bovine in ritual, especially the ritual of sacrifice, is not identical. The sacrifice of a bovine carries less status than that of a horse. In the *dana-stuti* hymns of the *Rigveda* in which the poets list the wealth they request from their patrons, the number of horses is far fewer than of cattle.<sup>57</sup> Excavated animal bones from Hastinapur in the first millennium BC when the use of the horse was more frequent, indicate that horse bones make up only a very small percentage of the bones, the largest amount being those of the *bos Indicus*, the humped cattle.<sup>58</sup> The horse being more valuable, its association was with the more spectacular sacrifices such as the *ashvamedha*. The eating of cattle flesh was limited to occasions when the animal had been sacrificed or on special occasions. It was not eaten routinely. This is a common feature among cattle pastoralists who thus preserve quality stock.<sup>59</sup> The horse sacrifice is mentioned in the *Vedas* and the number of horses said to have been sacrificed are sometimes excessive. Exaggerated figures may have been intended to suggest power and wealth and need not be taken literally. There is no evidence of the sacrifice of a horse from Harappan sites and even what is interpreted by some as evidence of the sacrifice of an animal is extremely limited.<sup>60</sup>

In the Indo-Iranian borderlands, horse remains date to the second millennium BC. The arrival of the horse in the Swat valley of Gandhara and in the Ganga valley dates to the first millennium BC. Found in the early part of the millennium at sites such as Atranjikhera, Hastinapur, Bhagwanpura, the remains increase in the subsequent period.<sup>61</sup> From the Vedic texts onwards the horse is symbolic of nobility and is associated with people of status. In the *Avesta* the suffix *aspa* meaning 'horse' is frequent in the names

of those claiming status and even as late as the Mauryan period, a high official in Saurashtra carries the Iranian name, 'Tushaspa'.<sup>62</sup> Functionally, it could be used to substantially improve efficiency in controlling herds grazing in extensive areas, apart from being an important adjunct in combat and in the fast transportation of individual riders or those riding chariots. If the culture of the *Rigveda* is to be equated with the Harappan culture, then obviously the horse has to be found in the Harappan cities. But even allowing for a generous time margin, there are no horse remains prior to the second millennium BC some of the earlier suggested identifications of bones being now confirmed as those of the onager and the ass. There is therefore a frantic search for horse bones from archaeological levels prior to the second millennium BC.<sup>63</sup> The point which also needs to be emphasised is that the discovery of a single tooth of a horse at Lothal<sup>64</sup> does not indicate the presence of the horse on the scale described in the *Rigveda*. Such single items are a striking contrast to the more substantial bones found at Hastinapur and other sites in the first millennium BC.

Associated with the horse was the chariot and the spoked wheel, appearing on the scene at the same time and with antecedents further west. Prior to this, the ox-cart and the discoid wheel were extensively used in north-western India. Models of actual wheels for toy carts from Harappan sites are generally of the discoid variety. Occasionally there are wheels with four lines radiating from the hub painted over the solid wheel. These have been taken to represent spoked wheels.<sup>65</sup> But the construction of a spoked wheel is different and presumably would be represented with many more spokes and a rim.

Iron weaponry dates to about 800 BC although some iron artefacts from central India are said to be earlier.<sup>66</sup> References to iron therefore in the Vedic texts would date to the first millennium BC. Interestingly in peninsular India, megalithic burials in the first millennium BC reveal the extensive use of iron artefacts as well as the presence of the horse, but such burials are located in areas which are either still Proto-Dravidian speaking or else have had a proto-Dravidian substratum. Thus in spite of these innovations, there seems to have been little inclination to adopt Indo-Aryan. Two other non-artefactual innovations may be suggested: the binary system of measurement used in Harappan times may have been replaced by the decimal, more familiar to Vedic texts; and the use of the solar calendar in addition to the lunar calendar would have been a functional advance with the gradual reorganisation of agricultural activities. Did these technological changes provide a lever, giving an edge to the speakers of Indo-Aryan who may have introduced the innovations initially. Possibly the claims based on the power of sacrificial ritual was yet another lever. The redefinitions in culture, social organisation and economy resulting from technological innovations would have been a slow process. They also imply far more complex and varied dimensions of historical change, than the simplistic mono-causal

explanations of either conquest or alternatively indigenous origins for everything.

Archaeology and language can provide separate evidence on some essential questions, as for example an enquiry into migrations. This would involve an explanation of why there was a need to move and of the numbers involved. The expending of wealth on the journey would have to be controlled so as not to be counter-productive and this would determine up to a point the goods with which people traveled.<sup>67</sup> Assessing linguistic change would indicate the adoption and modification of the languages of those migrating and the areas to which they migrate. In the case of pastoral migrants, the animals bred might provide clues to travel. The domestication of the *bos Indicus* breed of cattle, evident from excavations, links the Indus valley and Iran. Migrations may have been occasioned by the search for pastures and north-western India may have been familiar to herders from the borderlands. If exchange and incipient trade also featured as they often do with pastoral groups, then the circulation of items may have encouraged a larger circuit of travel and a greater mixing of the populations. Where the migration included farming communities, new agricultural land and the diffusion of crops would be part of the pattern.

If the existing evidence is integrated then the emerging picture is one where the presence of Indo-European in the form of Old Iranian and Proto-Indo-Aryan and Indo-Aryan is registered in the second millennium BC. This period also sees the arrival of the horse, the chariot and spoked wheel, and the use of iron, all of which are more evident in the first millennium. At a few sites in India there is an overlap of Late Harappan with the Painted Grey Ware—the latter dated to the first millennium BC. This makes a more plausible picture for the entry of Indo-Aryan into Indian than the arbitrary shifting of the chronology of the Harappan culture and the *Rigveda*.

Equally important to the question of why Indo-Aryan was adopted is the nature of the interaction between the speakers of the various languages. I have suggested elsewhere that initially it involved a symbiotic relationship between agriculturalists and pastoralists,<sup>68</sup> a symbiosis which is evident in many such mixed societies. With the decline of the cities of the Indus civilisation and the breakdown of political authority, villages would have been open to predatory raids from various sources. In the collapse of the Harappan system, the erstwhile farmers and craftsmen and particularly those living in villages who had been deeply integrated into the Harappan system, would have been economically rootless. The Harappan agrarian system appears to have been more carefully controlled in the north-west, if the granaries can be regarded as an indication. This was the region which would have received settlers from the borderlands. The incoming groups may not have been averse to controlling what remained of the pre-existing hierarchical structure. Did non-Aryan speaking agriculturalists seek protection from the chiefs of pastoral clans who were Aryan speaking? This

does not imply the conquest of the former by the latter, but a system of patronage, which may even have existed in Harappan times except that now the patrons were not from the Harappan cities. The familiarity which these chiefs had with the horse and with new weaponry would have enabled them to provide the required protection as well as place them in a status of superiority. Such a relationship may on occasion have led to localised conflict, but would have soon assumed a symbiotic pattern, involving bilingualism at first and subsequently the adoption of an evolving Indo-Aryan. Linguistic convergence may follow from the meeting of two languages. Curiously, words associated with agriculture in Vedic Sanskrit and as early as the *Rigveda*, are often non-Aryan.<sup>69</sup> At some sites of the Painted Grey Ware cultures in northern India, frequently identified as 'Aryan', there is an interesting mixture: the cultivation of rice and the domestication of the water buffalo are associated with developments in eastern India, but the horse is an importation from the west.<sup>70</sup>

The historical reconstruction of this period therefore presents a different picture from that envisaged in existing theories. Given the range of evidence, there can now be a greater exploration of reconstructions rather than an insistence on reconstructing a history for which the evidence has yet to be found. The identification of archaeological cultures as Aryan, which was methodologically untenable, becomes irrelevant. Archaeology does not provide evidence to identify language where there is an absence of a script. Even where languages are related as in Proto-Indo-Aryan, Old Iranian, and Indo-Aryan, the material culture of the societies associated with these languages is dissimilar.

The notion of an Aryan race identified on the basis of an Aryan language has now been discarded. Language and race are distinctly different categories. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to discard the term 'Aryan' as well, using only Indo-Aryan to identify the language, or else staying strictly within the definition of *arya* from Sanskrit texts where it is a linguistic and social qualifier, without the overlay of nineteenth century theories. The reconstruction of the societies of the period would draw substantially on archaeological data. How and when the Aryan language entered India and the process of its adoption and adaptation requires to be investigated as a process in social history and not as providing identities which we today can label as indigenous or alien for purposes of narrow nationalism. A comparative analysis of analogous situations might provide some clues. Interestingly, the Indian experience parallels that of Iran where Old Iranian as an Indo-European language was ancestral to later Iranian languages. This contrasts with the short-lived intrusion of Indo-European in Turkey and Syria.

Such a change of focus would require a search for a graduated interaction over many centuries between various settlements and cultures, where

large-scale violent conflict would be limited. The *Rigveda* refers to relations between the *arya-varna* and the *dasa-varna*. These are generally identified as distinct peoples, although *arya* carries the connotation of a person of status and knowing Sanskrit. The presence of non-Aryan speakers are registered in the reference to those of obstructed speech, *mridhravac* and those who could not speak correctly, *mleccha*. The later Vedic texts provide evidence of regional variations. Whereas appeals are made to the gods to destroy the *dasas*, mention is also made of the generosity of wealthy *dasa* chiefs for whom rituals are performed. The hostility of the *arya* towards the *dasa*, refers more frequently to differences in worship and rituals, than to physical differences. Nor was the conflict always between *arya* and *dasa*. Conflicts also occur between established clans and *arya* enemies are mentioned.<sup>71</sup> Subsequent Vedic texts also acknowledge that some respected *brahmanas* are *dasiputrah*, the sons of *dasis* and this evidence has been used to suggest that Vedic *brahmanas* were, to a large extent, recruited from the priest class of the pre-Aryan population. It has even been hypothesised that the *dasas* were the remnants of the Indus civilisation.<sup>72</sup> It would seem then, that the relationship is more ambivalent than has been recognised so far.

This in turn relates to the subordination of the *dasa* by the *arya*. This is central to Jyotiba Phule's version of the Aryan theory revived in Dalit politics today and its reversal from the Hindutva perspective. With the emergence of *varna*, which some sociologists have described as ritual status; the lowest category came to be called *shudra* and was expected to be servile. *Dasa* was not a ritual status and the word eventually was used for a slave or a servant, its antonym being *arya*. In the post-Rigvedic *Brahmana* texts, the appeal to the gods to destroy the *dasas* declines, for by now they are already low in the hierarchy of stratification. In a situation as complex as this, the mechanisms of subordination may be less evident than in the projection of conquest, but nevertheless they cannot be ignored. The presumed identity and lineal descent of the supposed Aryan in this reading of the evidence becomes questionable and therefore, difficult to use for political mobilisation in contemporary times.

The process of the subordination of the *dasa* by the *arya* could provide clues to some aspects of relations of dominance and subordination in the social history of later times. Hierarchies, differentiations and regulations essential to caste, exist as part of its stratification and social functioning, irrespective of an Aryan component. The insistence on differentiating between the alien/foreign and the indigenous is historically untenable for earlier times when even the existence of such a differentiation based on the premises being suggested, is questionable. 'Indigenous' and 'foreign' as notions are neither permanent nor unchanging nor transparent. The identities of the indigene and the alien are constantly mutated throughout history. It is more pertinent to analyse the major historical processes of early times,



namely, the emergence of dominant groups—the *aryas*, and the subordination of others referred to as *shudras* and *dasas*.

I have tried to show that the application of the Aryan theory to Indian history, which began as an attempt to uncover the beginnings of Indian history, to explain the origins of Indian society, and to establish what were thought to be the roots of Indian identity, has inevitably become entangled in Indian politics. The emphasis today on a particular kind of Aryanism is also a revival of nineteenth century historiography, moulded by specific ideological concerns of time and place. This historiography has undergone a radical change where the insistence on Aryanism as an essential ingredient of the civilisations of Iran and Greece is now passe, for civilisation is being viewed as a process and not the monopoly of a particular people.<sup>73</sup>

The Aryan theory in India, has been in some ways, a kaleidoscope where scholarly and political concerns have in the past been trying to change the configurations of the pattern. Used in the search for modern Indian identities by drawing on a definition of origins, it sought legitimation from history, and tried to justify the aspirations of one particular group or controvert those of others. In its contemporary incarnation it provides an important element in the search for collective identities in political contestation, quite apart from contested interpretations of early Indian history. I have tried to show that in reconstructing the beginnings of Indian history, the entire complex range of evidence—archaeological, linguistic and textual—has to be brought into play, relating both to India and the neighbouring areas. This is so formidable in itself, that historians have neglected to comment on the political appropriations of the theory in our time. Thus, when the theory is again becoming an agency of empowerment and entitlement, to include some and exclude others, historians will need to discard spurious history, irrespective of the insights it might provide into the politics and ideologies of the present.

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