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Volume III

THE TEXTS, POLITICAL HISTORY AND  
ADMINISTRATION

Till *c.* 200 BC

Editors

Dilip K. Chakrabarti and Makkhan Lal



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## I.2. The Horse and the Aryan Debate

### Editorial Note

[In this essay M. Danino discusses threadbare the issue of horse in the context of the Aryan debate in India. Those who doubt the presence of horse in the Indus context may well reflect on the opinion of the veterinary officer of the Loralai cantonment that the dentition of the horse remains found at Rana Ghundai (5th millennium BC) was identical with that of the cavalry horses in his charge. In the end, one might find the debate entirely pointless. Much later, F.E. Zeuner casually observed in his *A History of Domesticated Animals* (1963) that the Rana Ghundai horse bones might as well belong to wild ass. This is the root of the subsequent tendency to invoke wild ass whenever horse bones are mentioned in the Indian protohistoric context. We have no reason to believe that the opinion of the veterinary officer of a cantonment with cavalry horses was less dependable than the opinions of scientists whose familiarity with Indian horses may be considered minimal. However, an important and original aspect of Danino's essay is his emphasis on the world of symbolism with which the horse in the *Rigveda* may be associated.]

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The presence or absence of the horse in the Harappan Civilization has been a bone of contention for decades, especially in the context of the Aryan invasion theory. The argument is familiar: since the *Rigveda* uses the word *asva* over 200 times, the Vedic society must have been full of horses, and the Harappan Civilization, from which the noble animal is conspicuously absent, must be pre-Vedic and non-Aryan. The horse must therefore have been brought into India around 1500 BC by the Indo-Aryans, who used its speed to crushing advantage in order to subdue the native, ox-driven populations. This line of reasoning is regarded as so evident and

foolproof that numerous scholars, reference books and history textbooks dealing with India's protohistory have regarded it as the final word on the issue.

However, on closer view, there are serious flaws at every step of the argument—and indeed several concealed steps. We will first examine the physical evidence of the horse from various protohistoric sites, both in terms of skeletal remains and depictions, before turning to problems of methodology that have compounded the confusion, in particular the persisting misreadings of the *Rigveda*.

#### HORSE REMAINS AT NEOLITHIC SITES

Our first surprise is that contrary to common assertions, archaeologists have reported horse remains from India's prehistoric and protohistoric sites. Let us begin with a few Neolithic sites.

In Uttar Pradesh, at Mahagara (in the Belan Valley of Allahabad district), not only were horse bones identified, but “six sample absolute carbon 14 tests have given dates ranging from 2265 BC to 1480 BC.” (Sharma et al. 1980: 220-21). At nearby Koldihwa, G.R. Sharma identified horse fossils (Sharma 1980). The Mahagara dates are of course incompatible with the view that horses were introduced in India in the second half of the second millennium BC.

The case of Hallur in Karnataka, excavated in the late 1960s, is similar: horse remains found there were dated between 1500 and 1300 BC. The site being located some 2,000 kilometres south of the Khyber Pass, the Aryans could hardly have introduced the horse there in so short a time (moreover, these dates are uncalibrated and would therefore have to be pushed back a few centuries). When K.R. Alur, an archaeozoologist as well as a veterinarian,

published his report on the animal remains from the site, he received anxious queries, even protests: there had to be some error regarding those horse bones. A fresh excavation was eventually undertaken some twenty years later—which brought to light more horse bones, and more consternation. Alur saw no reason to alter his original report, and wrote that his critics' opinion “cannot either deny or alter the find of a scientific fact that the horse was present at Hallur before the (presumed) period of Aryan invasion” (Alur 1992: 562).

#### HORSE REMAINS AT HARAPPAN CIVILIZATION SITES

Right from 1931, horse remains were reported at Mohenjodaro (Sewell and Guha 1931) and Harappa (Nath 1961: 1-2), although from late levels. In 1962, the archaeozoologist Bholu Nath reported on the remains of the horse (*Equus caballus* L.)... from the prehistoric site of Harappa, found in the unworked collections with the Zoological Survey of India. This is the first record of the true horse... from the region” (Nath 1968: 5).

We do not know the precise layers where these bones were found. However, about the same time, Mortimer Wheeler acknowledged the presence of horse remains in an early level of Rana Ghundai (in northeast Baluchistan):

... the bones of a horse occur at a high level at Mohenjodaro, and from the earliest (doubtless pre-Harappan) layer at Rana Ghundai in northern Baluchistan both horse and ass are recorded. It is likely enough that camel, horse and ass were in fact a familiar feature of the Indus caravan. (Wheeler 1968: 82)

Coming from a staunch believer in the Aryan invasion, the statement is significant. Bholu Nath also certified the identification of a horse tooth at Lothal (Rao 1985: 641-42). B.B. Lal referred



**Fig. 1.** Horse bones from Surkotada (in Kutch).

to a number of horse teeth and bones reported from Kalibangan, Ropar and Malvan (Lal 1997: 162), while S.P. Gupta added further details on those and listed earlier finds (Gupta 1996: 160-61).

A.K. Sharma's identification (Sharma 1974) of horse remains at Surkotada, in Kachchh (Fig. 1), marked a significant step in the debate about horse remains from Harappan sites.

Sharma's verdict was endorsed by the late Hungarian archaeozoologist Sándor Bökönyi; in 1991, Bökönyi confirmed several bones and teeth to be "remnants of true horses" (Bökönyi 1997: 299), and what is more, domesticated horses; he also took care to distinguish them from

remains of the local wild ass (or khur). Bökönyi's 1993 report to the Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India was conclusive:

Through a thorough study of the equid remains of the prehistoric settlement of Surkotada, Kutch, excavated under the direction of Dr. J.P. Joshi, I can state the following: the occurrence of true horse (*Equus caballus* L.) was evidenced by the enamel pattern of the upper and lower cheek and teeth and by the size and form of incisors and phalanges (toe bones). Since no wild horses lived in India in post-Pleistocene times, the domestic nature of the Surkotada horses is undoubtful. This is also supported by an inter-maxilla fragment whose incisor tooth shows clear signs of crib biting, a bad habit only existing among domestic horses which are not extensively used for war (Bökönyi 1993).

Horse bones were also reported from the nearby Harappan site of Shikarpur "in the Mature Harappan period" (Thomas 1995: 39) and from Kuntasi at the boundary between Kachchh and Saurashtra (Thomas and Joglekar 1997: 769). Thomas and Joglekar summed up the picture thus:

The horse and the domestic ass are reported from the Mature and Late Harappan phases of a number of Harappan sites ... The horse has been found at Harappa, Mohenjodaro, Surkotada, Kalibangan, Lothal, Kuntasi, Malvan and Shikarpur. On the other hand, a few other contemporary sites, where the horse has not been found ... were primarily agro-pastoral settlements supplying food to the industrial/commercial centres. Wherever present, these beasts of burden probably increased mobility and helped in trade as well as transport. ... Considering that the presence of the horse during the Harappan period is a matter of popular controversy in Indian archaeology, the subject deserves more serious and systematic treatment than it has so far received (Thomas and Joglekar 1994: 186-87).

The culture of the Chambal Valley (in Madhya Pradesh) was explored by the



archaeologist M.K. Dhavalikar, with layers dated between 2450 and 2000 BC. His observations are revealing:

The most interesting is the discovery of bones of horse from the Kayatha levels and a terracotta figurine of a mare. It is the domesticated species (*Equus caballus*), which takes back the antiquity of the steed in India to the latter half of the third millennium BC. The presence of horse at Kayatha in all the chalcolithic levels assumes great significance in the light of the controversy about the horse (Dhavalikar 1997: 115).

As at Surkotada, the horse at Kayatha was domesticated.

In the face of reports from so many sites by so many experts, a blanket denial of the animal's physical presence in pre-1500 BC India appears indefensible. It seems hard to believe that all identifications of horse remains by the above experts could be wrong; yet, in practice, they are generally dismissed without discussion.

There is one exception, however: in a long paper, Richard Meadow and Ajita Patel did challenge Sándor Bökönyi's report to the Archaeological Survey. Bökönyi discussed their objections but, in the end, gave his reasons for sticking to his views (although he passed away before he could give his final response). Meadow and Patel concluded their arguments with the rather weak statement that "... in the end that [Bökönyi's identification of horse remains at Surkotada] may be a matter of emphasis and opinion" (Meadow & Patel 1997: 314). Their eagerness to make Bökönyi change his mind appears suspect insofar as they never challenged Indian experts such as A.K. Sharma, P.K. Thomas or P.P. Joglekar; it was only when Bökönyi endorsed findings on the "Harappan horse" that they felt the need for a rejoinder.

Since then, Meadow's and Patel's admittedly inconclusive paper has been quoted by several historians as the last word on the non-existence of the horse in the Indus Civilization (e.g., Sharma 2004; Thapar 2003: 85). Ironically, when proponents of the Aryan migration theory attempt to trace the introduction of the horse into Europe, they often turn to the same Bökönyi (e.g., Mallory 1989: 273; Sergent 1995: 397). It is curious that while his expertise is unquestioned in Europe, it should be challenged in India's case.

The old argument that purported horse remains invariably belong to species of wild ass such as the onager (*Equus hemionus onager*), the khur (*Equus hemionus khur*), or the plain ass (*Equus asinus*) is also dubious, firstly because it is sweeping in nature and produces little or no evidence, secondly because in several cases, the experts reporting horse remains have *simultaneously* reported remains of the wild ass from the same sites, which implies some ability to distinguish between those species, as we saw above at Rana Ghundai (Wheeler 1968: 82) or at Surkotada (Joshi 1990: 381-82).

Another frequent and sweeping objection is that the dates of the disputed horse remains are not firmly established and might be much more recent. But Jagat Pati Joshi's excavation report, for instance, makes it clear that,

At Surkotada from all the three periods quite a good number of bones of horse (*Equus Caballus* Linn) ... have been recovered. The parts recovered are very distinctive bones: first, second and third phalanges and few vertebrae fragments (Joshi 1990: 381).

The first of Surkotada's "three periods" coincides with the mature stage of the Harappan Civilization, which rules out the possibility of

the horse having been introduced into India in the second millennium BC.

A. Ghosh's authoritative *Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology* endorsed such findings:

In India the ... true horse is reported from the Neolithic levels at Kodekal [dist. Gulbarga of Karnataka] and Hallur [dist. Raichur of Karnataka] ... and Ropar and at Harappa, Lothal and numerous other sites. ...Recently bones of *Equus caballus* have also been reported from the proto-Harappa site of Malvan in Gujarat. (Ghosh 1989: 4)

Finally, S.P. Gupta offered a sensible reply to the further objection that horse remains, if at all they are accepted, rarely account for more than 2% of the total animal remains at any site. Pointing out that the same holds true of the camel and elephant (animals undeniably present in Harappan sites), he explained that this low proportion is "simply because these animals are not likely to have been as regularly eaten as cattle, sheep and goats as well as fish whose bones are abundantly found at all Indus-Saraswati settlements" (Gupta 1996: 162).

All in all, the case for the horse's physical presence in the Indus-Saraswati Civilization is strong, but needs to be confirmed by evidence yet to come out of hundreds of unexcavated sites. Archaeologist A.K. Sharma's conclusion, in a paper that surveyed the "horse evidence" and his own experiences in this regard, is worth quoting:

It is really strange that no notice was taken by archaeologists of these vital findings, and the oft-repeated theory that the true domesticated horse was not known to the Harappans continued to be harped upon, coolly ignoring these findings to help our so-called veteran historians and archaeologists of Wheeler's generation to formulate and propagate their theory of 'Aryan invasion of India on horse-back' .... (Sharma 1992-93: 31)

#### DEPICTIONS OF THE HORSE AND THE SPOKED WHEEL

The Harappans frequently used animal symbolism on their seals and tablets, in terracotta figurines, or as pottery motifs. While it is true that the horse does not appear on Harappan seals, it has been hastily claimed that the animal is never depicted at all. A horse figurine from Mohenjodaro (Fig. 2) drew the following comment from E.J.H. Mackay, one of the early excavators at the site:

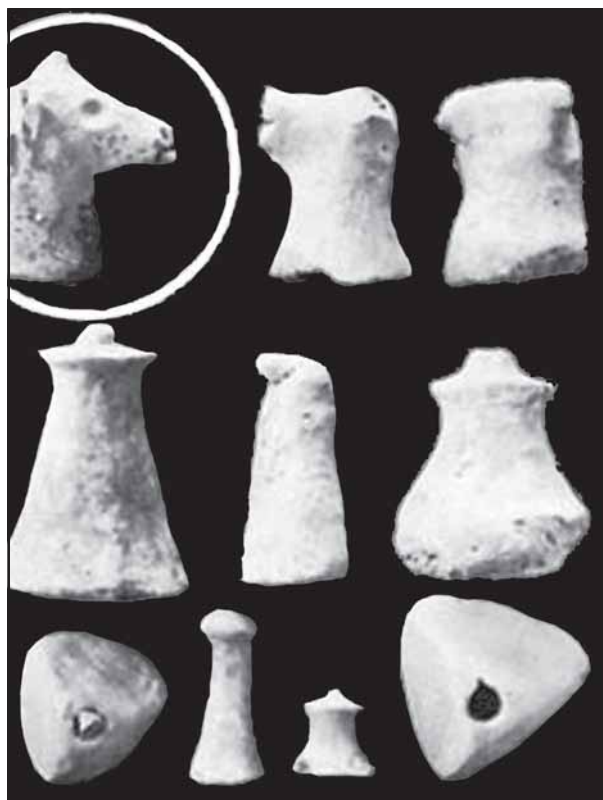
Perhaps the most interesting of the model animals is one that I personally take to represent a horse. I do not think we need be particularly surprised if it should be proved that the horse existed thus early at Mohenjodaro (Mackay 1938: 289).



Fig. 2. Horse figurine from Mohenjodaro.



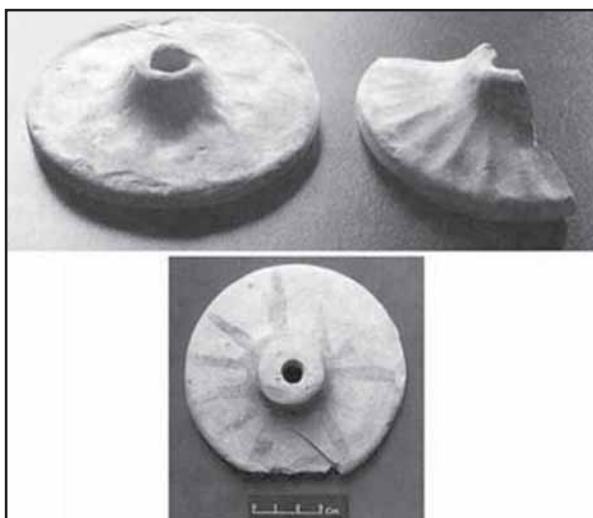
Fig. 3. Horse figurine from Lothal.



**Fig. 4.** A horse like figure from Lothal (circled as part of a set of gamesmen).

Wheeler, too, accepted it as such (Wheeler 1968: 109).

Another figurine was reported by Stuart Piggot from Periano Ghundai, and several at Lothal, some of them with a fairly clear evocation of the horse (Fig. 3 & 4) (Rao 1991). The horse also appears on some pottery, for instance at pre-Harappan levels of Kunal (Haryana), among other animals, according to the excavator (Bisht et al 2000: 49). Another figurine was found at Balu, with what looks like a saddle (Sethna 1992: 419-20). Dhavalikar, quoted above, mentioned “a terracotta figurine of a mare” in the Chambal Valley. Finally, the horse is depicted in rock art (for instance at Bhimbetka or Morhana Pahar in the Narmada Valley), although unfortunately, we have very few absolute dates for such art in India.



**Fig. 5.** Terracotta wheels from Banawali and Rakhigarhi showing spokes.

The horse controversy is not limited to the animal: the spoked wheel, too, is often said to have come to India along with the Aryans (e.g. Thapar 2000: 1131). “The first appearance of [the invading Aryans’] thundering chariots must have stricken the local population with a terror...” writes Michael Witzel in a grandiloquent echo of nineteenth-century racial theories (Witzel 1995: 114). The spoked wheel was seen as a crucial element in the speed game,



**Fig. 6.** Wheels with painted spokes from Bhirana.

compared to the slow bullock-driven solid-wheeled Harappan cart. However, in recent years, some evidence that the Harappans did have spoked wheels has turned up: on a few terracotta wheels from Banawali and Rakhigarhi, radial lines are clearly visible in relief or painted (Lal 2002: 74, from which Fig. 5 is taken). More such wheels have been found at Kuntasi (Dhavalikar 1997: 297), Lothal and Bhirrana (Rao 2005-06: 59-67). Many have a raised hub, which is sometimes grooved in addition, perhaps for a lynchpin to be lodged.

There is no doubt that the Harappans were familiar with spoked wheels. A systematic study of such terracotta models, which is yet to be done, may throw further light on this. But it should be borne in mind that even if such spoked-wheel chariots existed in Harappan cities, they could be drawn by bullocks than by horses.

#### METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Hard evidence apart, the appearance of the horse in the Indian subcontinent is, in reality, a complex issue, and the conventional view suffers from serious methodological flaws.

#### REMAINS AND DEPICTIONS OF THE HORSE IN INDIA AFTER 1500 BC

Assuming that the horse was introduced into India by so-called Aryans around 1500 BC, one would expect a marked increase in remains and depictions of the animal after that period. Yet, nothing of the sort happens.

Looking only at the early historical layers, Taxila, Hastinapura or Atranjikhhera (Uttar Pradesh) have indeed yielded bones of both the true horse and the domestic ass (let us note that the distinction between the two is no longer disputed here). But at other sites, such as Nasik, Nagda (Madhya Pradesh), Sarnath, Arikamedu

(Tamil Nadu), Brahmagiri (Karnataka), Nagarjunakonda (Andhra Pradesh), no remains of either animal have turned up. There are also sites like Jaugada (Orissa) or Maski (Karnataka) where the ass has been found, but not the horse (Nath 1968). Finally, data available from sites that do come up with horse remains show no significant increase in the overall percentage of horse bones or teeth compared to Harappan sites such as Surkotada.

If, therefore, the low amount of evidence for the horse in the Indus Civilization is taken as proof that that civilization is pre-Vedic, we may extend the same logic to the whole of early historical India. It seems clear that the horse was as rare an animal in pre- as in post-1500 BC India.

As regards post-1500 BC depictions of the horse, they are also barely more frequent than in Harappan sites: barring a few figurines at Pirak, Hastinapura and Atranjikhhera, we find no striking representations of the animal, while we would have expected the aggressive "Aryans" to pay rich tributes to their instrument of conquest, which, we are told, the *Rigveda* glorifies so much. And yet, "the first deliberate and conscious attempt of shaping a horse in durable material like stone was witnessed in the art of the Mauryas in India," writes historian T.K. Biswas (Biswas 1987: 46). Another historian, Jayanti Rath, commenting on the animals depicted on early Indian coins, remarks: "The animal world of the punch-marked coins consists of elephant, bull, lion, dog, cat, deer, camel, rhinoceros, rabbit, frog, fish, turtle, ghariyal (fish eater crocodile), scorpion and snake. Among the birds, peacock is very popular. The lion and horse symbols appear to have acquired greater popularity in 3rd century BC" (Rath, n.d.: 57)

All in all, the horse is a nearly invisible animal in pre-Mauryan India.

#### PHYSICAL REMAINS AND DEPICTIONS OF THE HORSE OUTSIDE INDIA

It helps to take a look at a few regions outside India. In contemporary Bactria, for instance, the horse is well documented through depictions in grave goods, yet no horse bones have been found. “This again underscores the point that lack of horse bones does not equal the absence of horse,” observes Edwin Bryant (Bryant 2001: 175)

In the case of the horse in America, where its spread is fairly well known, Elizabeth Wing points out,

Once safely landed in the New World, they are reported to have prospered along with cattle in the grazing lands, free of competitors and predators. Horse remains, however, are seldom encountered in the archaeological sites. This may be a function of patterns of disposal, in which remains of beasts of burden which were not usually consumed would not be incorporated in food or butchering refuse remains (Wing 1989: 78).

This compares with the picture we have formed of the horse in the Indus Civilization, and with Gupta’s similar observation on the non-consumption of horse meat. In other words, the rarity of horse remains in the third millennium is, in itself, inconclusive.

#### INTRODUCTION OF THE HORSE = ARYAN INVASION?

Another *non sequitur* is that since the true horse was undoubtedly introduced into India at some time, and probably from Central Asia, it can only have been introduced by immigrating Aryans.

As we have seen, the horse’s introduction must have taken place right from Mature Harappan times, if not earlier; but let us momentarily assume for the sake of argument that it only happened in Late Harappan times. Even so, how would that establish that the horse

came as a result of an invasion or a migration, when other possibilities are equally valid? Bryant, again, puts it crisply:

In the absence of irrefutable linguistic evidence, there is no reason to feel compelled to believe that the introduction of the horse into the subcontinent is indicative of the introduction of new peoples any more than the introduction of any other innovatory items of material culture (such as camels, sorghum, rice, lapis lazuli, or anything else) is representative of new human migratory influxes (Bryant 2001: 228)

In other words, at whatever epoch, the horse could have been introduced as an item of trade—and we do know that Harappans had extensive trade contacts from Mesopotamia to Central Asia, all regions that were familiar with the domesticated horse in the third millennium bc. This is indeed the stand of archaeologists like J.F. Jarrige or J.M. Kenoyer. The latter, for instance, notes that the adoption of the horse or the camel reflects “changes [that] were made by the indigenous [Late Harappan] inhabitants, and were not the result of a new people streaming into the region. The horse and camel would indicate connections with Central Asia” (Kenoyer 1995: 227).

#### THE PROBLEM OF DEPICTION

Regardless of the issue of physical remains, depictions of the animal on Harappan artefacts are very few; the Indus seals, for instance, depict bulls, buffaloes, elephants, tigers, etc., but no horses. However, as Gupta points out, the camel, “wolf, cat, deer, Nilgai, fowl, jackal are rarely or never found in [Harappan] art but their presence has been attested by bones” (Gupta 1996: 162). We may add the camel and the lion, which, although certainly present in some regions of the Harappan Civilization, were also never depicted. K.D. Sethna pertinently asks,

“As there are no depictions of the cow, in contrast to the pictures of the bull, which are abundant, should we conclude that Harappa and Mohenjodaro had only bulls?” (Sethna 1992: 179). Sethna makes the opposite point that the mythical unicorn is found on numerous seals, and asks, “Was the unicorn a common animal of the proto-historic Indus Valley?” (Sethna 1992: 179)

Animal representations, or their absence, have cultural reasons: the Indus seals were not intended to be zoological handbooks. Until we can read the Harappan mind—and the Indus script—we can only conjecture about the meaning of its iconography.

#### IS THE VEDIC HORSE THE TRUE HORSE?

An unstated assumption underlies the whole controversy: it is taken for granted that the Vedic horse is the true horse, *Equus caballus* L. Although this might appear self-evident, it is not. In fact, as some scholars have pointed out, the *Rigveda* (1.162.18) describes the horse as having 34 ribs; so does a passage in the *Satapatha Brahmana* (13.5). However, the true horse generally has two pairs of 18 ribs, i.e. 36 and not 34.

This suggests that the horse referred to in the *Rigveda* may have been a different species, such as the smaller and stockier Siwalik or Przewalski horses, which often (not always) had 34 ribs. The question is far from solved, but there is no compelling reason to assume that the Vedic hymns refer to the true horse.

#### MEANING OF ASVA IN THE RIGVEDA

We now come to a more fundamental point. After the nineteenth-century European Sanskritists, most scholars have taken it for granted that Vedic society should be full of

horses because of the frequent occurrence of *asva* in the *Rigveda*. This conclusion is flawed on two grounds.

First, because the language of the *Rigveda* is a metaphorical one, whose symbolism constantly operates at several levels. A literal reading of the *Rigveda* is bound to fail us, and is unjustified when other mythologies, from the Babylonian to the Egyptian or the Greek, have long been explored at figurative and symbolic levels.

As early as 1912-14, a decade before the discovery of the Indus Civilization, and thus long before the controversy over the Harappan horse, Sri Aurobindo in his study of the *Rigveda* and the Upanishads found that “the word *asva* must originally have implied strength or speed or both before it came to be applied to a horse” (Aurobindo 2001: 277). More specifically,

The cow and horse, *go* and *asva*, are constantly associated. Usha, the Dawn, is described as *gomati asvavati*; Dawn gives to the sacrificer horses and cows. As applied to the physical dawn *gomati* means accompanied by or bringing the rays of light and is an image of the dawn of illumination in the human mind. Therefore *asvavati* also cannot refer merely to the physical steed; it must have a psychological significance as well. A study of the Vedic horse led me to the conclusion that *go* and *asva* represent the two companion ideas of Light and Energy, Consciousness and Force (Aurobindo 1998: 44).

Were we to accept a literalist reading of the sort used by proponents of the Aryan migration theory, we would be forced to describe the Dawn as “full of cows and horses”, a ludicrous statement. A description of Indra as he who “found the cattle, found the horses, found the plants, the forests and the waters” (*Rigveda* 1.103.5) would be just as meaningless.

Sri Aurobindo continues:

For the ritualist the word *go* means simply a physical cow and nothing else, just as its companion word, *asva*, means simply a physical horse.... When the Rishi prays to the Dawn, *gomad viravad dbehi ratnam uso asvavat*, the ritualistic commentator sees in the invocation only an entreaty for “pleasant wealth to which are attached cows, men (or sons) and horses”. If on the other hand these words are symbolic, the sense will run, “Confirm in us a state of bliss full of light, of conquering energy and of force of vitality” (Aurobindo 1998: 123-24).

In other words, Sri Aurobindo’s reading of the Veda rejects a rigid equation *asva* = horse. Indeed, the word *asva* is repeatedly associated with the notion of speed: *asva* is “swifter than Indra, though Indra is as swift as thought” (1.163.9), which certainly cannot apply to the concerned animal. Nor can the constant association of the Vedic horse with waters and the ocean, from the *Rigveda* (he is born in the sea or “upper waters”, 1.163) all the way to the Puranic myth of the churning of the ocean. Again, the Ashvins—the horse-riding twin gods—are designated as birds, speed being the connotation of both animals. Classical Hinduism continued to use the horse as a symbol for life-energy, as for instance when the *Gita* compares our outer being to a chariot whose horses need to be reined in by the charioteer, that is, the higher being.

Sri Aurobindo’s stand received indirect support from a wholly different angle, that of the late anthropologist Edmund Leach, who warned against the picture of a horse-rich Rig-vedic society:

The prominent place given to horses and chariots in the Rig Veda can tell us virtually nothing that might distinguish any real society for which the Rig Veda might provide a partial cosmology. If anything, it suggests that in real society (as opposed to its

mythological counterpart), horses and chariots were a rarity, ownership of which was a mark of aristocratic or kingly distinction (Leach 1990: 240).

Thus the place of the horse in the *Rigveda* needs to be reassessed from a decolonized standpoint, with a fresh look at the Vedic message and experience. If Sri Aurobindo and Leach are right, then the word *asva* refers only occasionally to the actual animal, and its frequent appearance in the Vedic hymns is no indication that the animal had a corresponding physical presence. Indeed, even in today’s India, despite having been imported into India for many centuries, the horse remains a relatively rare animal, invisible in most villages. Within this framework, the *asvamedha* or horse sacrifice also deserves a new treatment, which Subhash Kak has cogently outlined (Kak 2002).

At this point, a valid objection may be raised: if the horse did exist in the Indus, and if one wishes to build bridges between this civilization and Vedic culture (e.g., Danino 2010: 191-251), why is the horse not depicted more often as a symbol in Harappan art? One possible answer is that even if the *Rigveda* is contemporary with, or older than, the mature Indus Civilization, we need not expect Harappan art to be a complete reflection of Vedic concepts. The Veda represents the specific quest of a few *rishis*, who are unlikely to have lived in the middle of the Harappan towns. Although some Vedic concepts and symbols are visible in Harappan culture, the latter, as preserved in the archaeological record, comes out primarily as a popular culture; in the same way, the culture of today’s Indian village need not offer a precise reflection of the Upanishads or Puranas. Between Kalibangan’s peasant sacrificing a goat for good rains and the *rishi* in quest of *Tat ekam*—That One—there is a substantial difference, even if they may ultimately have compatible worldviews.

Only a more nuanced and perceptive approach to Harappan and Vedic cultures can throw light on their relationship.

#### IS *ASVA* ONLY ARYAN?

One more unstated assumption is that *ashva*, in the *Rigveda*, is a purely Aryan animal. But is that what the text actually says? No doubt, most of the references place *asva*, whatever the word means in the *Rishis*' mind, squarely on the side of the gods and their Aryan helpers. But it turns out that there are quite a few revealing exceptions, when Dasyus and Panis also possess *asvas*.

For instance, Indra-Soma, by means of the truth (*eva satyam*), shatters the stable where Dasyus were holding "horses and cows" (*asvyam gobh*) (4.28.5). In another hymn, Indra's human helpers find the Panis' "horses and cattle": "The Angirasas gained the whole enjoyment of the Pani, its herds of the cows and the horses" (1.83.4). Indra again conquers an enemy and receives in tribute "heads of horses" (7.18.19). Elsewhere, after smiting the Dasyus, he "gained possession of the sun and horses ... [and] the cow that feeds many" (3.34.9).

Just as revealing is the famous dialogue between the divine hound *Sarama*, Indra's intransigent emissary, and the *Panis*, after she has discovered their faraway den, where they jealously hoard their "treasures". *Sarama* boldly declares Indra's intention to seize these treasures, but the *Panis* are unimpressed and threaten to fight back; they taunt her: "O *Sarama*, see the treasure deep in the mountain, it is full of cows and horses and treasures (*gobhir asvebbir vasubhir nyrsab*). The *Panis* guard it watchfully. You have come in vain to a rich dwelling" (10.108.7, translation adapted from Varenne 1967: 152-53). Every verse makes it

clear that all these treasures—horses included—belong to the *Panis*; at no point does *Sarama* complain that these are stolen goods: "I come in search of your great treasures", (10.108.2) she declares at first, yet asserting that Indra is fully entitled to them.

Now, following the colonial reading of the *Veda*, we would be forced to acknowledge that the Dasyus and *Panis*, regarded, then, as the Aryans' indigenous victims, also had horses of their own—which would of course negate the whole idea of the animal having been introduced by the Aryans. It does look as if the *Veda*'s equine landscape is getting a little overcrowded. To understand the Dasyus' and *Panis*' "horses", we need to return to the Vedic symbolism proposed by Sri Aurobindo: the demons do possess lights (cows) and energies or powers (horses), but, as misers, keep them for themselves, neither for the gods nor for man. In the Vedic view, this is a transgression of the cosmic law. The duty of the *rishi*, helped by the gods, is to reconquer those "treasures" and put them to their true purpose; only then will the cosmic order be re-established. This is certainly more interesting than tribal clashes of primitive cattle and horse thieves. In fact, the *Rigveda* itself makes its symbolism transparent: in the last verse (10.108.11) of the dialogue between *Sarama* and the *Panis*, the narrator concludes, "Go away, you *Panis*! Let out the cows which, hidden, infringe the Order!" This "order" is *ritam*, the cosmic law. It is infringed not because the *Panis* hide a few "cows" and "horses" inside a cave, but because they misuse their lights and powers and do not offer them up as a sacrifice. That is why Indra is entitled to their treasures—not because he is a greedy tribal leader out to expand his territory and cattle wealth. That is why, incidentally, he can shatter the demons' dens only "by means of the truth."



The numerous references to Indra as a bringer or conqueror of horses and cattle now become clear: “Break open for us the thousands of the Cow and the Horse” (8.34.14, Sri Aurobindo’s translation).

In sum, if we adopt a literalist approach, we must concede that the horse is as much an animal of the Dasyus as it is of the Aryas: the horse can no longer be seen as a marker for immigrating Indo-Aryans. The only way out of such self-inflicted conundrums is to abandon colonial readings of the Veda and to look deeper for what “horse”, “bull” and “cow” really stood for in the Vedic *risbis*’ mind.

Let us also note that contrary to what is often stated, the horse (or its symbol) is not the Veda’s primary animal: that honour goes to the bull, a symbol of power and might, as in many other ancient cultures. Every powerful Vedic god—Indra, Agni, Varuna, Vishnu, Rudra, etc.—is praised as a bull, very rarely as a horse.

#### CONCLUSIONS

That proponents of the Aryan theory should have skirted such important points, as regards both findings and methodology, is a reflection of how simplistically the whole issue has been treated. We may offer the following conclusions:

1. Several species of *Equus*, including the true horse, existed in the Indus Civilization, probably in small numbers. Some of them may have entered India over a much longer time span than is usually granted, in the course of the

Indus Civilization’s interactions with neighbouring areas.

2. This process continued with a gradual but slight increase from the second millennium BC right up to early historical times. There was no epoch exhibiting a sudden, first-time introduction of the animal.
3. The *Rigveda* has been misread; it tells us strictly nothing about a sizeable horse population, and may instead suggest its rarity. The animal was important in symbolic, not quantitative terms, and need not even have been the true horse.
4. The *Rigveda* also tells us nothing about conquering Aryans hurtling down from Afghanistan in their horse-drawn “thundering” chariots and crushing indigenous tribal populations.
5. The horse is unlikely to have been culturally important for the Harappans, but this has no bearing on the relationship (or absence of it) between Harappan and Vedic cultures, since the Vedic horse—whether the animal or what it symbolizes—is not the exclusive preserve of the Aryas, but belongs just as much to their adversaries (again, whether real or figurative ones).

The horse issue illustrates the survival of outdated perspectives and erroneous methodologies. It can be resolved only through fresh archaeozoological research combined with a new approach to India’s most ancient hymns.

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