

The Aryan Invasion: Myth or fact?

Michel Danino points out significance historical evidence that demystifies the Indian subcontinent's greatest fable

Most Indian history textbooks tell us that about 1500 BCE, semi-barbarian, Sanskrit-speaking nomads called 'Aryans' poured from Central Asia into the Indian Subcontinent. There, they came upon the Indus or Harappan cities, destroyed them and drove survivors southward (where they became 'Dravidians'), although softer versions propose that the Aryans arrived after the decline of the Indus cities. Either way, they swept across the Indus plains, composed the Vedas over a few centuries, spread Sanskrit and their caste system over India, and built the mighty Ganges civilization.

This neat tale, known as the 'Aryan invasion

theory' (AIT) or 'Aryan migration theory' (AMT) was first propounded in the nineteenth century by European scholars, notably F Max Müller. It was a convenient way to explain obvious similarities between Sanskrit and Greek or Latin, since another branch of the Aryans were assumed to have migrated towards Europe. But it also allowed India's British masters to portray themselves as 'one more Aryan wave' destined to bring about a 'reunion of the great Aryan family' and to bring once more true civilization to this land! Besides, the Aryan theory proved useful in deepening divisions among Indians between high-caste (supposed descendants of the Aryans) **E**

and low-caste or tribal (supposed descendants of India's original inhabitants), also between North and South Indians.

In Europe, meantime, an obsession with racial superiority and the mythical 'Aryan race' added grist to the mill of a rising German nationalism, until Hitler declared that the said race was the 'master race' destined to rule the world—with the consequences we know. But let us leave those aberrations and examine the theory in its Indian context.

The silence of the Indian texts

It rested not just on linguistics but also on clues that European Indologists claimed to find in the *Rigveda*, India's most ancient text, consisting of hymns to various gods and goddesses. But some Indians disagreed. Swami Vivekananda, for instance, asserted, 'There is not one word in our scriptures, not one, to prove that the Aryan ever came from anywhere outside India.' Indeed, the *Rigveda's* geography is limited to northwest India. Moreover, as Sri Aurobindo pointed out, its rich spiritual symbolism and the complexity of its Vedic Sanskrit language are quite incompatible with the cultural status of supposed Aryan nomads.

Curiously, the earliest Tamil (or 'Sangam') literature is also silent about a clash with Aryans, and on the contrary lavishes praise on the Vedas. In other words both supposed aggressors and supposed victims carry no memory of the alleged invasion—a strange case of double amnesia!

Archaeology shows no evidence

Had an Aryan people entered the Subcontinent, they would have brought new types of tools or weapons, new styles of pottery, figurines and other art forms; but archaeologists working in the Indus basin have detected no such intrusive culture in the 1st millennium BCE. The preceding millennium (2600–1900 BCE to be precise) saw in the same region the rise and decline of Harappan cities, but in none of them has evidence of man-made destruction come to light. For these two reasons, the current consensus among archaeologists is to reject the invasion / migration theory.

The verdict of archaeology is not just



A manuscript of the Rig-Veda, India's most ancient text. Harappan cities, like Dholavira here (in the Rann of Kutch), show no evidence of having been destroyed by invaders



negative, however. Had Aryans come, the Indus civilization would be culturally pre-Vedic, while the Gangetic civilization of the first millennium BCE would be Vedic, so that we would have a wide cultural gulf between the two—a gulf earlier referred to as a 'Dark Age' or 'Vedic Night'. But in recent decades, numerous bridges have, on the contrary, come to light, both in technical fields (from construction or metallurgy to water systems and agriculture) and in cultural areas: Harappan seals depicting deities seated in yogic postures, female figurines with *sindoor* (vermilion) applied at the parting of the hair, male figurines in various *asanas* (some doing a *namaste*), fire and sacrificial altars, worship of a Mother goddess,

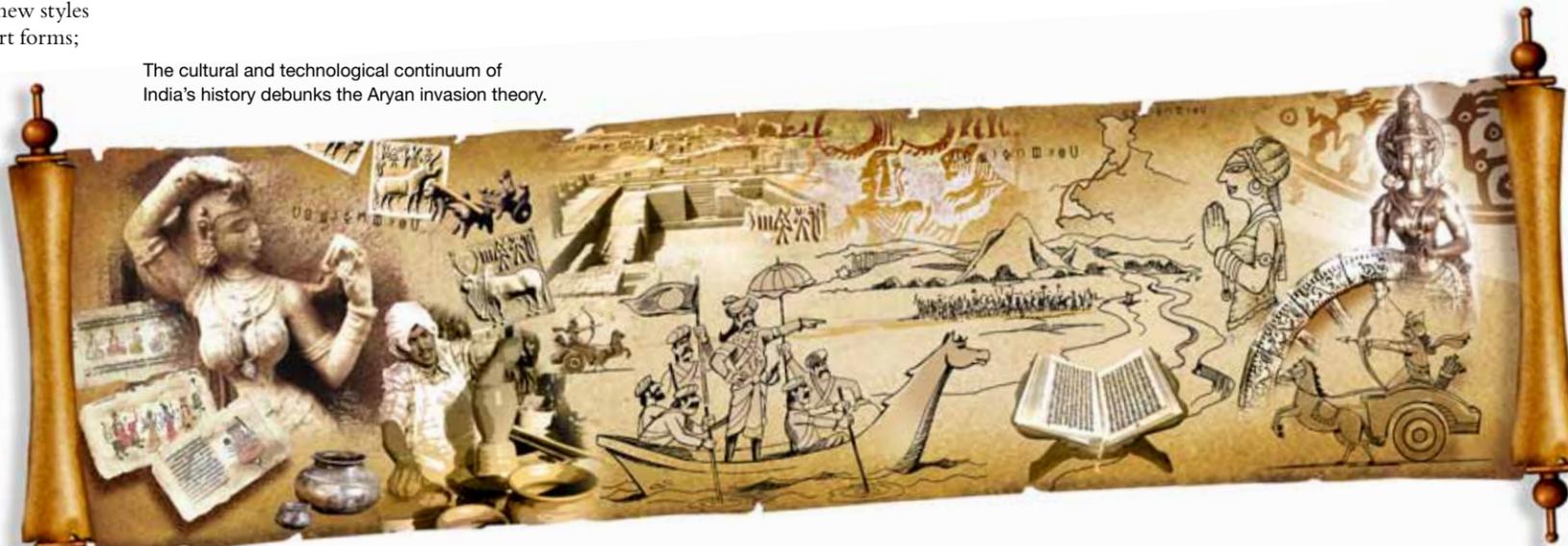


A Harappan figure doing a namaste

reverence for the swastika, a *linga*-like object, the *trishula* and the *ashvattha* (or pipal) tree, and ornaments, such as anklets, among many others. (For further information, see article 'The Harappan Legacy', BBC Knowledge, April 2012)

The emerging picture is that of a cultural continuum from India's prehistory to its historical phase in the Indo-Gangetic plains. As the US archaeologist Jonathan Mark Kenoyer puts it, "Current studies of the transition between the two early urban civilizations claim that there was no significant break or hiatus." The British archaeologist Colin Renfrew went further by stating, "It is difficult to see what is particularly non-Aryan about the Indus Valley civilization."

The cultural and technological continuum of India's history debunks the Aryan invasion theory.

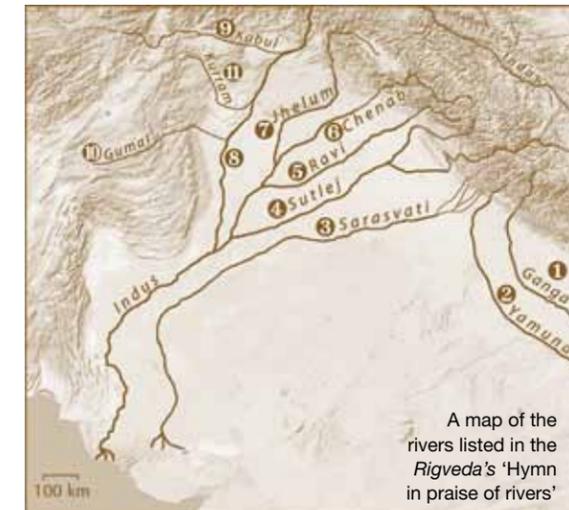


While the origins of Vedic culture remain a complex and open-ended issue, the Aryans have quietly bowed out of the archaeological literature of the Subcontinent: not only are they so elusive as to be invisible, but they are simply not needed to explain the evolution of cultures from proto-historical to historical India.

The Sarasvati

The *Rigveda* lavishes praise on Sarasvati, the goddess-cum-river, as 'flowing from the mountain to the sea', while a 'hymn in praise of rivers' specifically locates the Sarasvati between the Yamuna and the Sutlej. Intriguingly, the rivers listed are from east to west, while Aryan immigrants would have listed them from west to east. Later literature, such as the Mahabharata, describes the Sarasvati as disappearing in the desert; in time, the river becomes a metaphor for loss. However, since the nineteenth century, its dried-up bed has been traced by geologists, topographers and archaeologists, and more recently by satellite photography: it runs from the Shivalik Hills in Haryana (where a petty stream called 'Sarsuti' still exists today), is joined by several tributaries, proceeds through Punjab, Rajasthan and Pakistan's Cholistan desert in a course south of the Indus, all the way to the Rann of Kutch. At its widest, the Ghaggar-Hakra, as it is locally called, exceeds six kilometres, and most experts have proposed that the Sutlej and the Yamuna once contributed to it.

When was the Sarasvati reduced to a seasonal stream in its upper reaches? Archaeology again provides an answer, as some 360 Harappan settlements have



A map of the rivers listed in the Rigveda's 'Hymn in praise of rivers'



Part of a bronze figurine from Mohenjo-daro, with an anklet

Nothing in our knowledge of India's protohistory warrants a sharp demarcation between Aryan and non-Aryan races

been enumerated in the river's basin since the 1940s. And almost all the settlements located in that basin's central part, such as Kalibangan in north Rajasthan, were abandoned around 1900 BCE, which points to a collapse of the river system.

But then, how could Aryans, reaching the Sarasvati sometime after 1400 BCE, have worshipped it as a 'mighty river' 'flowing from the mountain to the sea'? There is a fatal chronological impossibility. In any case, only one culture—the Harappan—was identified in the Sarasvati's basin while the river was active, strongly suggesting a connection between Harappan and Vedic (even if the exact nature of that connection remains to be defined).

The real question

There is more evidence from anthropology and genetics. Apart from rejecting the notion of 'race' altogether (and therefore of an Aryan or a Dravidian race), they have recently demonstrated a biological continuity in populations of the Northwest around the time of the supposed Aryan immigration; both disciplines have failed to detect the arrival of a new people, forcing proponents of the migration theory to shrink it down to a 'trickling in' by a few Afghan tribes, few enough to avoid detection by archaeology, anthropology or genetics.

But how few? Can we picture a small number of nomads imposing their culture and language on the whole of north India? In historical times, just the opposite happened with sizeable invaders from Persians to Hunas: their cultural impact on India was minimal, while they often found themselves 'Indianized' like the Kushans.

Although many questions remain to be answered, nothing in our knowledge of India's protohistory warrants a sharp demarcation between Aryan and non-Aryan 'races', cultures, even deities (Shiva is Dravidian, Vishnu is Aryan!). Whatever migrations may have taken place to and from India, a rigid break between pre- and post-Aryan India finds justification neither in early literature nor in archaeology. ■

French-born **Michel Danino** has been living in India since 1977. He lectures on Indian civilization at several higher educational institutions, and writes in French and English. His recent book is titled *The Lost River: On the Trail of the Sarasvati* (Penguin India, 2010).

FIND OUT MORE

The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate by Edwin Bryant (OUP, 2001)

The Sarasvati Flows On: The Continuity of Indian Culture by B.B. Lal (Aryan Books International, 2002)