

The Origins of India: A Comment

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that to make sense of the “out of India” debate over the origins of India’s civilization, i.e., whether it was born in India and spread outwards or created after the arrival of “Indo-Aryans” from the Eurasian Steppes, one should look less at politics and more at archaeological, historical, and anthropological evidence. I argue that India’s Vedic civilization was actually *born in India*, but its birth was made possible by the *interaction and assimilation*, both peaceful and violent (largely peaceful), between the migrating Steppe nomads (an incontrovertible fact) and the preexisting Indus Valley people. Moreover, the “out of India” theory is not wholly incorrect if applied to a later time frame, especially after 4th century BC. Combining Hindu and Buddhist religious and political ideas, Indian civilization did travel far and wide, creating a cultural “Indian World Order” in most parts of East, Southeast, and Central Asia.

Keywords: Indus Valley Civilization, Vedic Civilization, “Indo-Aryan” migration, Jawaharlal Nehru, Narendra Modi, *Hindutva*, Indian World Order

Los orígenes de la India: un comentario

RESUMEN

Este ensayo sostiene que para dar sentido al debate “fuera de la India” sobre los orígenes de la civilización india, es decir, si nació en la India y se extendió hacia el exterior o si se creó después de la llegada de los “indoarios” de las estepas euroasiáticas, uno Deberíamos mirar menos a la política y más a la evidencia arqueológica, histórica y antropológica. Sostengo que la civilización védica de la India en realidad nació en la India, pero su nacimiento fue posible gracias a la interacción y asimilación, tanto pacífica como violen-

ta (en gran medida pacífica), entre los nómadas esteparios migratorios (un hecho incontrovertible) y los pueblos preexistentes del valle del Indo. Además, la teoría de “fuera de la India” no es del todo incorrecta si se aplica a un período posterior, especialmente después del siglo IV a.C. Combinando ideas religiosas y políticas hindúes y budistas, la civilización india viajó a lo largo y ancho, creando un “orden mundial indio” cultural en la mayor parte de Asia oriental, sudoriental y central.

Palabras clave: civilización del valle del Indo, civilización védica, migración “indo-aria”, Jawaharlal Nehru, Narendra Modi, Hindutva, orden mundial indio

印度的起源：评论文

摘要

本文论证，要理解关于印度文明起源的“印度起源说”争论（即印度文明是诞生于印度并向外传播，还是在欧亚草原的“印度-雅利安人”到来之后创造的），则应该少关注政治，多关注考古、历史和人类学方面的证据。我认为，印度的吠陀文明实际上诞生于印度，但它的诞生是通过“迁徙的草原游牧民族（这是无可争议的事实）和先前存在的印度河流域民族之间的和平与暴力（基本上是和平）的相互作用和同化”而得以实现的。此外，如果将“印度起源说”应用于后来的时间框架，特别是公元前4世纪之后，那么该理论也并非完全错误。印度文明结合了印度教和佛教的宗教及政治思想，确实传播得很远，并且在东亚、东南亚和中亚的大部分地区创造了文化上的“印度世界秩序”。

关键词：印度河流域文明，吠陀文明，“印度-雅利安”移民，贾瓦哈拉尔·尼赫鲁，纳伦德拉·莫迪，印度教特性，印度世界秩序

How diverse was India at the birth of its civilization? To make sense of this question, we need to go back to the Indus Valley Civilization.

The Indus Valley Civilization is no stranger to Indian politics, from Jawaharlal Nehru to Narendra Modi. In 1938, nine years before India's independence, its future first Prime Minister wrote an article for the influential American magazine, *Foreign Affairs*. In this article he noted:

Five to six thousand years ago the Indus Valley civilization flourished all over northern India and probably extended to the south also ... Since that early dawn of history innumerable peoples, conquerors and settlers, pilgrims and students, have trekked into the Indian plains from the highlands of Asia and have influenced Indian life and culture and art; but always they have been absorbed and assimilated. India was changed by these contacts and yet she remained essentially her own old self. (Nehru 1938, 231–43)

Eight decades later, in June 2018, India's 14th Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, gave a keynote speech to Asia's premier security conference, the Shangri-La Dialogue, in Singapore. Modi exhorted:

Thousands of years ago, the Indus Valley Civilisation as well as Indian peninsula had maritime trade. Oceans and Varuna—the

Lord of all Waters—find a prominent place in the world's oldest books—the Vedas (MoEA, GoI 2018; Jain and Lasster 2018).

The context and purpose of Nehru's speech in 1938 were vastly different from Modi's in 2018. Nehru's words were meant to reassure Americans that an independent India could stand on its own feet. Although "most Americans sympathize with India's struggle for freedom," he wrote, they were "wondering whether it is possible to build a united and progressive nation out of the seemingly infinite diversity that makes up the fabric of Indian life." They need not worry, Nehru urged, for although "India was divided and conquered many times in history ... always the idea of the political unity of India persisted," since the Indus Valley Civilization (Nehru 1938, 231–43).

While Nehru wrote in the shadow of British prison, Modi was showcasing India's rising power. Speaking in Southeast Asia, a region where India had been a major provider of civilization, Modi's purpose was to remind world leaders of India's past and future gravitas in the Indian Ocean and around the world.

Like many Indian leaders when they speak abroad, Modi did give a nod to India's diversity and democracy.

We are inheritors of Vedanta philosophy that believes in essential oneness of all, and celebrates unity in diversity एकम सत्यम, विप्राः बहुदावदन्ति (Truth is one, the learned speak of it in

many ways). That is the foundation of our civilizational ethos—of pluralism, co-existence, openness and dialogue. The ideals of democracy that define us as a nation also shape the way we engage the world. (MoEA, GoI 2018)

By all accounts, his speech was quite well-received. He came across as a suave, well-liked, and well-respected world leader. Modi astutely summed up India's civilizational identity.

His passionate invoking of India's civilizational ethos to stress its diversity notwithstanding, many people, Indians and foreigners alike, are increasingly doubtful whether his government been faithful to that ethos. Are they acting exactly the opposite of what Modi was saying in Singapore about India's, "unity in diversity," "pluralism, co-existence, openness and dialogue," and "ideals of democracy?" While Modi was uttering those lofty words about India's past, his party and government back home were being accused by many of India's secular parties and elite of reinventing India's history, undercutting its democracy, and putting forth an alternate reality.

That alternate reality is known as the "out of India" theory. It might have originated from a man who had, just a year after Nehru's *Foreign Affairs* essay, outlined a competing vision that is best described as "unity without diversity."

That man was Madhav Sardashiv Golwalkar, the second Sarsanghchalak of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the powerful populist force behind the Bharatiya Janata Par-

ty (BJP). In 1939, Golwalkar had published a book titled *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, in which he asked: "After all what authority is there to prove our immigrant nature? The shady testimony of Western scholars?" (Golwalkar 1939, 42).

Golwalkar's questioning of "our immigrant nature" means denying the well-founded view that a wave of nomadic pastoralists, the so-called Indo-Aryans, had arrived (immigrated) in northern India sometime between the 20th and 15th century BC. Whether this was an invasion or simply a matter of filling the void left by a deurbanizing Indus Valley society was not a settled issue in Golwalkar's time. But that was not his concern. What was more important for his Hindu nationalist ideology was in which direction the flow of Indian culture went.

For Hindutva hardliners, the answer was unambiguous—it went "out of India." India was a giver, not a taker, of civilization. The Vedic civilization, they argued, was born on Indian soil and linked to the Indus Valley civilization. Far from being imported by foreigners into India, it was exported from India to West Asia, and Europe, thereby creating the myriad Indo-European languages and culture.

There is a politically-charged debate in India these days about whether an Indo-Aryan migration took place in the first half of the 2nd millennium BC, whether the Hindu-Vedic civilization was indigenous or brought by nomadic arrivals, and whether the native-born Indian Vedic civilization went "out of

India” to create the wider universe of Indo-Aryan language and culture.

Yet the “out of India” thesis has been seriously challenged, first by archaeology and historiography, and lately by genetics (for the debate on this matter see Venkataramakrishnan 2018; Joseph 2018; Witzel 2018; Muhammad 2020). Recent genetic studies appear to prove a significant influx of migrants from the Steppes and Central and West Asia during that period. They do not support the view that the original Indus Valley people and Indo-Aryans are genetically the same people. More important, they also show that contemporary Indians are a remarkable ensemble of genes.

For their part, though, the Hindu nationalists dismiss scientific proof that shows the absence of any genetic connection between the Indus Valley inhabitants and the Indo-Aryan migrants. But the birth of civilizations is too complex to be settled by genetic studies alone.

This highly political controversy misses a key point. Both sides seem to agree that there was no Aryan “invasion,” although the predominantly male Indo-Aryan settlers have been characterized as an aggressive bunch in smashing property and snatching local women after they arrived in new places. At the same time, the Hindu nationalists in the BJP (keeping in mind the party has many moderate elements who take a different view) have a point.

Like all political debates, positions on both sides on the current debate about the origins and spread of In-

dian civilization are more extreme than what the facts indicate.

It is possible to see this debate from a different perspective. The Vedic civilization was actually *born in India*, but its birth was made possible by the *interaction*, both peaceful and violent, between the migrant Steppe nomads and the preexisting Indus Valley people. It is this blending which needs to attract a great deal of further research and debate. Such research should address the following questions.

First, one should examine whether the Indo-Aryans nomads had a well-organized religion before they arrived in India. Most likely they did not. Although some of their gods like Indra, Varuna, Mitra, and Nasatyas are mentioned as witnesses to the Hittite-Mittani Treaty of 1350 BC in West Asia (Kulke and Rothermund 1986, 33), most of the rituals and practices of the Indo-Aryans seemed to have been developed during or immediately after they reached *Indian soil*. The Rig Veda provides ample proof of this. This is also why despite a possibly common origin, and root words, Sanskrit developed a distinctive quality from other Indo-European languages.

Second, one should look at whether some of the deities of the Indus Valley people might have been adopted by the Indo-Aryans. For example, the Indus Valley seal, Pashupati, has been regarded as a proto-Shiva by some historians (Ibid, 20).

Third, the Indus Valley had a thriving trade and cultural interaction with the early Sumerian and Mesopota-

mian civilizations, and they influenced each other. The Indo-Aryans were part of a general migration of Steppe nomads, some of whom had earlier settled in those very sites of Mesopotamia, in West Asia, Iran, Anatolia, as well as India, etc. It is thus quite likely that some of the Indo-Europeans who arrived in India did not come directly from the Steppes but from the Steppe settlements in West Asia (like Mittani and Iran), or at least had come into contact with these earlier Steppe settlers on their journey to India. This created at least additional common ground for the fusion between the Indus Valley and Indo-European cultural beliefs and practices.

Fourth, throughout history, conflict and war have been a major catalyst for inter-cultural mixing and learning. The Romans borrowed much from the Greeks after defeating them. The Crusades, which ended in a draw, spurred knowledge borrowings by the Christians from the Muslims through massive translations of Arabic and Persian texts to Greek, Latin, and French, including some original Greek texts which the Arabs had earlier translated into their language.

The Vedas provide evidence of conflicts between the Indo-Aryans and the Indus Valley people, although it's doubtful that this amounted to an Aryan genocidal invasion that wiped out the Indus Valley culture. What is more likely is that those conflicts would have led to cultural interaction and mutual learning in areas such as technology, food habits and cultural and even religious beliefs. In her Book *Early India*,

Romila Thapar notes that the early Indo-European languages (Sanskrit) absorbed Dravidian and Munda elements, suggesting "considerable intermixing of the speakers of the two languages" (Thapar 2002, 86).

Fifth, studies in art history and archaeology prove beyond doubt that when two cultures meet, the result is adaptation and localization, not displacement or extinction, of one by the other. Often a newly arriving "foreign" people or culture adapts to a preexisting local culture, in which the local cultural habits and beliefs play a decisive role. This is amply demonstrated in Southeast Asia.

When Indian culture arrived in Southeast Asia, as I have discussed in my book *Civilizations in Embrace* (2012), it did not extinguish the preexisting Neolithic culture, but might have enhanced it. As D.R. SarDesai, one of leading historians of Southeast Asia, put it, Southeast Asia "adopted the alien cultural traits without in the process losing its identity" (SarDesai 1994, 16). Southeast Asians borrowed amply but selectively (they did not take the Hindu caste system for example), but what they did, including Indian art, religion, political concepts and practices, helped them to build stronger and more durable empires, under rulers who became identified with powerful Hindu deities, especially Shiva.

This is what might have happened to the Indus Valley Civilization or Harappan culture when the nomadic pastoralists arrived. One must look closely at whether and to what extent the

Harappans might have shaped the incoming Indo-Aryan culture or vice versa. The interaction and possible merger between the two cultures should be a guiding principle and focus for further research.

Sixth, there is considerable archaeological, literary, and sociological evidence to show that India's Vedic Sanskrit civilization travelled far and wide, to South India in a process which the noted Indian sociologist M.N. Srinivas called Sanskritization (Srinivas 1956, 481-96), and to Central and Southeast Asia, if not to Europe. Sheldon Pollock's idea of "Sanskrit Cosmopolis," presented in his magisterial *The Language of Gods in the World of Men*, captures the story of this diffusion convincingly (Pollock 2006).

What is also beyond doubt is that the spread of Indian civilization was done not through the sword but through a peaceful transfer of ideas and beliefs—not through colonization, but through acculturation and localization. This sets Indian civilization apart from its major counterparts in the world. As Paul Wheatley in his Presidential Address to the Association of Asian Studies (AAS), noted, "the process by which the peoples of western Southeast Asia came to think of themselves as part of Bharatavarsa (even though they had no conception of 'India' as we know it) represents one of the most impressive instances of large-scale acculturation in the history of the world" (Wheatley 1982, 27-28).

The fact that this happened after, not before the arrival of the Indo-Ary-

an pastoralists, need not be a matter of shame for any proud Indian nationalist. The peaceful spread of Indian civilization to Central Asia, China, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia is a stunning achievement.

Next, a point about the longevity of Indian civilization. This is a separate issue, but still important to the current debate over the "out of India" thesis. It stokes Hindu nationalist pride to deduce from Rakhigarahi excavations that the origins of the Harappan or Indus Valley Civilization might go back to a much earlier period (seven or eight thousand years). But if conclusively proven, this does not negate the eclectic founding of Indian civilization, since the older civilization did not have all the major Vedic traits. Because as we now know, the people of Harappa did not disappear, but merged with, the new ideas and cultural practices brought by the Indo-Aryans. Otherwise, we would not have so much cultural overlap between the people of North and South India, despite the latter being considered closer to Indus Valley people in genetic terms.

This happens to all civilizations. Witness the transformation of Chinese civilization more than a thousand years after it was founded with the arrival of Buddhism from India. It is pretty hard to think of Chinese civilization today without considering the impact of Buddhism, a foreign religion. But the presence of Buddhism does not undermine Chinese claim to be one of the oldest continuous civilizations in the world. Accepting and establishing the merger of the Indo-Aryans with the

preexisting Indus Valley civilization would enhance the claim of the India to be the world's oldest continuous civilization.

If the evidence of a merger between the Indus Valley and Indo-Aryan cultures is correct, it considerably extends the lifespan of Indian civilization. Presently, China claims to be the world's oldest continuous civilization. But its earliest proven civilization is Shang, from about 1600 BC period (the claim of a Xia dynasty dating to 2000 BC has not been conclusively proven). But the Indus Valley Civilization is no myth. And it might have extended back to a much earlier period (by seven or eight thousand years). With evidence of its continuity in both genetic and cultural terms, it is India which stakes the claim to the world's longest continuous civilization.

We thus need less politics and more archaeological, historical, and an-

thropological research to explore and establish the social and cultural connections, mutual borrowings, and genetic and cultural merger between Indus Valley and Indo-Aryan cultures to establish the true origins and identity of Indian civilization.

The affirmation of India's diversity by political leaders and public intellectuals would ring hollow if they would not accept that the Indian civilization was founded upon a blending of diverse and eclectic elements—genetic, social, cultural—and this might have started with the encounter between the Indus Valley culture and the Indo-Aryan arrivals, who were immigrants in the modern sense. It is this amalgamation which has contributed to the vitality and longevity of the idea of India, and its projection to the wider world, creating the basis of what I call the Indian World Order.

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