



Trails, footprints, hoofprints

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This paper takes issue with the notion behind some genetic sampling of populations that there are autochthonous groups (designated tribal) in India, and that to give a group, its ‘anthropological name’ [sic] is valid. The archaeological and textual evidence of the earliest known Indo-Europeans and Indo-Iranians is given in bare outline. Possible trails of the Indo-Aryans of Iron-age South Asia are detected in archaeological records, immigration through mountains in the northwest with horses and two-humped camels, and also incursions of small groups of horse-riders, from Vidarbha all the way south to the Tamil country.

Keywords. Archaeology; human groups as samples; horses and riders

The task assigned to me was to give an archaeological perspective on the origin, diversity and migration of populations. Archaeology’s subject matter is material remains in their contexts (the natural habitat, the dwellings or deserted houses, or graves or foundations of sacred buildings). Material culture is understood as artefacts with their diverse individual traits, their discovery as assemblages, and their coherence as cultures, all in the context of features (pits, floors, reliquaries) and landscapes.

This may appear precise enough, but archaeology has few conceptual entities of its own. We can only infer that small groups of structures were villages, its residents functioning as face-to-face communities, or that animal bones, charred grains and flaked stone tools comprise the remains of subsistence economies, which we would view as aiming for not maximization but for food security. Also, we would infer that the inhabitants of small village sites had marital alliances and other exchanges with people of other villages in the region.

Borrowed cultural notions, however, are periodically corrected in archaeology, as they are in the ‘parent’ social science (say, anthropology). An instance is the *idée fixe* that in our country some people constitute the *adivasi* or autochthons or original inhabitants of a place. This was a way to replace the notion of the ‘tribe’ (mistakenly thought to be a colonial idea and a pejorative), but it only brought about inexactitude.

Who can tell that X or Y people are the autochthons of this place or that, and on what criteria? We certainly do not refer back to the Old Stone Age when using this label. The Deccan College referred to the settling of a chalcolithic village, Navdatoli, on the north bank of the Narbada river as

‘colonization’ (Sankalia *et al.* 1971) because the chalcolithic settlers had brought with them a knowledge of some crops and animals, the ways of house building, fabricating stone tools, pottery firing and so on. In their work on the Neolithic and chalcolithic peopling of Malwa and Maharashtra, scholars of the Deccan College repeatedly referred to the ‘colonization’ of various sites and regions.

It is a well-known fact that imperial and national governments, in their enumerations of people and regions in gazetteers, revenue records, census lists, etc., often took an ethnonym to be coterminous with, even a synonym of, a particular area or administrative place. This even though there was a known recent past of the area having seen migrations, social change, and the fission and fusion of clans, lineages and tribes.

I argued (Ratnagar 2010) that some tribal people – meaning people who claim a common ancestor, share a language and a culture, and most important, utilize land and forest resources jointly and not as private property – living near Chhotaudepur in eastern Gujarat are not to be called Bhil. Bhil is no one’s name for themselves, but a derogatory and dismissive ethnonym for the outcast. This term is synonymous with ‘Kali paraj’ in Gujarati. In the villages where I worked, the tribal people called themselves Rathwa, Naikda or Dhanak and objected to being called ‘Bhil’.¹ One was thus surprised to see

¹ An origin myth of the Bhil is revealing. Born to a god, this person was an ugly thief, thus banished to the forest where he and his family lived by the bow-and-arrow and came to be known as Bhil. In 1832 Malcolm wrote that it was a name for plunderers of the mountains. Even as regards language, 26 dialects are reported in a continuum along central India. The Rathwas with whom I interacted, incidentally, had come to the Chhotaudepur area from Alirajpur, within living memory.

that in a 2009 paper on genetics, the authors (Reich *et al.* 2009) state that their populations or units of investigation were designated by ‘anthropological name’ (what in any case is that?).² It is now known that there is often in the anthropological literature an incorrect identification of groups. PK Dasgupta and BK Roy Burman (in papers in Miri M (ed.) 1993 *Continuity and change in tribal society* (Shimla: IAS)) both say that ethnic boundaries are not a matter of assumption in any culturally heterogeneous situation. Moreover, the identification of groups should not lead to the assumption that an ethnic boundary means homogeneity within. Ethnicity is not a primordial state, but ‘politically created and recreated’ as a social structure changes. We assume that a group is X or Y, but very often these are names imposed on groups who are marginalized. It would be nice if scientists showed some sensitivity to this and geographic location, in order to focus on ‘effectively endogamous groups(s)’. There is a red dot inscribed ‘Bhil’ in the western part of their map. Clearly something is not satisfactory.

In his descriptions of the cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of central India, Verrier Elwin (1964) describes the prosperity of the Gonds in centuries past, when they lived under their own chiefs. However, with few developed institutions of social and political collectivity, they could not withstand the onslaught of Maratha armies; they dispersed, and retreated into the thick forests on the hills. Many Gond groups became Hinduized, and among many of them their native language, Gondi, fell into disuse.

A similar picture is drawn by James C Scott (2009) in *The Art of Not Being Governed*, an account of how, in Asia from the Indian frontier eastward to Vietnam, people fled the state territories in the plains in order to escape taxes, punishment or conscription. Groups broke up or assumed new identities, or in one ‘jellyfish’ case, denied itself even an ethnonym.³

The reader will appreciate therefore that it is not possible to narrate the movements of ethnic groups – much less language groups – in archaeology. Consider thus how little we have on the ground about the ancient Hittites of Anatolia.

1. The earliest known Indo-Europeans

The Hittites came into Anatolia soon after 2000 BC and gradually gained control of Hattusha (modern Boghazkoy), the fortified capital, and ruled the land of Hatti, as it was

² In the early twentieth century, Max Weber had observed that ethnic groups cherish a belief in common origins, which belief is usually fictitious and not a list of objective traits. Such a belief does not create the group: it is the group that creates the belief, the ideology. Frederik Barth considered the authority on ethnicity, showed that identities or ethnicities are negotiated and then renegotiated as continuous interactions are maintained with other groups; ethnic groups are not, he said, culturally isolated.

³ The political and economic background to such retraction being the practice of a variety of livelihoods including swidden cultivation on the margins of peasant agriculture and the frequent absence of chiefs.

known before their arrival, from about 1650 to 1200 BC. Written documents in Hittite were deciphered by Hrozny in 1915 and it is he who gave the name ‘Hittite’ to the language. Its speakers called their language ‘Nashili’. The land was known to the older occupants as Hatti and there already existed an advanced culture and developed technology, which influenced the Hittite polity.

In terms of material culture, however, the Hittites left no discernible ethnic markers.

Hittite was one of the earliest branches of Indo-European, perhaps splitting from the parent group even before Proto-Indo-European had acquired its form. Thus, it has some archaic forms as regards its genders and tenses, for instance (Bloomfield 1921).

Late contemporaries of the Hittites were the Mitannian rulers of a state in northern Syria, where the population spoke the Hurrian language but the Indo-European Mitannians formed the ruling elite between, say, 1500 and 1275 BC. Their throne names were Indo-Iranian while they spoke Hurrian and no case can be made out for a large population influx into Syria in this period. It has been suggested that some Indo-Aryan-speaking mercenaries could have held power for some time. (a) There is a treaty with the Hittites, a copy of which was found in the Hattusha archive, in which the Mitannians take oaths by Varuna, Indra, Mithra, etc., deities who show a clear Vedic connection. (b) A Mitannian chariot horse trainer, Kikkuli by name, wrote a treatise around 1400 BC, using numbers that were very much like those in Vedic (e.g., *panzawartanna* for 5 rounds) even though the language of his treatise was Hittite. Concerning Syria at this time, Akkermans and Schwartz describe a multi-cultural setting, the art a blend of Syrian and regional styles, the polity headed by the Mitannians but with local chiefs holding their own. Again there are few material culture indicators of a Mitannian elite presence in Syria,⁴ except that there is a marked rise in the proportion of horse bones in the total animal remains recovered in the later second millennium BC at a few Syrian sites. This does not mean that there was necessarily a pastoralist society at large.

2. The Indo-Iranian homeland

From where had the Mitannians, with the close relationship of their language to Vedic Sanskrit, come? T Burrow (1973) suggested a common Indo-Iranian homeland in Northern Iran – Central Asia – the Hindu Kush uplands. He suggested various groups hived off around 2000 BC and migrated towards Syria and towards India. It was later that a migrant group settled in Iran. Burrow makes the interesting point that this emigration of the various groups being very gradual, the undivided homeland population would have been very large. Slow migrations were only much later succeeded by horse-

⁴ There are a couple of terracotta plaques showing the horse-drawn chariot.

mounted incursions. Burrow points to an ideological antagonism between those who chanted the *suktas* of the Rgveda on the one hand and those who sang the Avestan *gathas* on the other.

As MA Mehendale put it (1993), in the ancestral period the people spoke a language and shared a culture. Vedic and Avestan are the closest languages of the entire Indo-European family, and with Burrow, Mehendale thinks the common language may be called Proto-Indo-Iranian. This would have been the source also of Dardic and Nuristani languages. Significantly, both Iranians and Rgvedic people used *Arya* as self-referents.

We can now ask what archaeology can tell us about the Indo-Iranian homeland. I follow, for this, the work and inferences of EE Kuzmina (2008).⁵ The Indo-European homeland as a whole was the steppe land of Eurasia [east of the River Dnieper], a landscape of grass more than trees and few perennial rivers. Kuzmina describes the steppe as a huge, fluid cultural space, 8500 km from west to east. An early stage of economic and cultural development, say, 5000 BC, was one with evidence for horse hunting at sites such as Dereivka. This steppe was the natural habitat of the wild horse. The landscape east of the river Don was dotted with kurgans, low earth mounds protecting burial chambers in which horses were sometimes buried with individual persons.

In northern Kazakhstan, it appears, in the fourth millennium Botai for example, the horse was domesticated. A rider could control his mount with a strap or a cord, says Kuzmina. (No bridle was needed until a warrior sat on a horse and used a bow-and-arrow or a long lance/javelin as his weapon.) On the whole, horse-mounted pastoralists could travel afar; they could use vast stretches of pasture and thereby increase their herds; they would need scouts on swift horses for this; and their cultural community could on the whole be a far-flung one.

Around 2000 BC there was Sintashta, a settlement cum cemetery east of the Urals. This was part of a sub-culture of the Andronovo culture, stretching from the Ural river to Kazakhstan. The site is marked by wooden defences and rich graves where the horse and the ten-spoked wheel are in evidence. A new cultural horizon had spread out from the Urals, says Kuzmina. She sees the Indo-Iranian homeland culture in the kurgans, horses, the light chariot marked by the spoked wheel, Bactrian camels, weaponry and a warrior elite. Some influence may have spread to Turkmenia (a spoked wheel in the Namazga VI period), and on to the Swat valley (where, however, Lamberg-Karlovsky finds no Andronovo artefact).⁶

In Swat the Gandhara Grave Culture in its Period IV may possibly be coeval with the presence of the Dardic language. Many cemeteries were intrusive in Swat in this period, at Timargarh, Katelai, etc., from say 1700 BC onwards. There were horse burials and certain shapes in fine grey pottery with striking parallels in Iran. Much has been written about this archaeological material in Pakistan; not much about the pottery, however. It is mainly the horse burials and the intrusive nature of this culture that are suggestive of an Indo-Aryan immigration, nothing else.

3. Trails down the northwestern mountain passes into the greater Indus Valley

The Bolan Pass is the terminus of a world highway – from Kandahar to the Indus – travelled in the past by armies, adventurers, migrants, traders and in part also by pastoralists and their flocks. On its Kachi plain terminus lies Mehrgarh, the earliest known Neolithic site of southern Asia where a western Asiatic package of crops and animals were domesticated and were to become the staples of the Indus civilization (2600–1800 BC) subsistence. The Kachi plain, besides, has been a winter retreat for pastoralists and their animals, who descend from the high mountains of Baluchistan in order to escape the snows of the high altitudes. From 6000 BC Mehrgarh grew in population, craft technologies and trade, probably because of annual visits of herdsmen. Chiefships could have developed here because of the need to institutionalize exchanges (livestock and milk products for grain and pottery, for instance) between the local farmers and visiting herders, because of the need to institutionalize practices such as the grazing of sheep on the stubble of fields, or the access of animals to water bodies. In the chalcolithic period, settlements with elaborately painted ‘Quetta’ pottery grew in the vicinity of this major route, and also in Shahr-i Sokhta in Seistan.

A substantial proportion (40%) of the pottery made during the founding of the settlement of Shahr-i Sokhta near the Hamun-i Helmand was this Quetta ware, actually a ware first produced in the Geoksyur delta, which is the endoritic delta of the Tedzen River in Turkmenia. At Shahr-i Sokhta, people flaked lapis lazuli into beads. Significantly, here the two-humped Bactrian camel is evidenced by flat cakes of the dung of a young camel collected in a pot, a camel foot bone, and some camel hair woven into fabric with goat hair. It is almost inevitable that lapis lazuli beads were found in Mehrgarh.

Then, sometime during the Harappan era, Shahr-i Sokhta was abandoned, for good, and so too were settlements along the Bolan highway.

How did the Harappan system acquire lapis, then? Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets mention Meluhha as a source of this sky-blue stone, and there is archaeological evidence that it was transported by sea. But there is no lapis in the Kachi plain on the terminus of the Bolan route, at sites

⁵ Also CC Lamberg-Karlovsky (2002).

⁶ I omit from this discussion an account of the BMAC culture, 1800–1500 BC, of implanted and fortified settlements, advanced metallurgy, a plethora of small seals of various types, but just one young horse burial and no light chariot or spoked wheel.

such as Harappan Nausharo. (Mehrgarh had been abandoned.)

A Harappan colony was established downstream of the lapis quarries on the River Kokcha in the high terrain of Badakhshan. A small site with diagnostic Harappan material culture, Shortughai was obviously set up to control the movement of lapis, otherwise in pastoralist hands.

What is interesting is that at the end of the Harappan period, traffic down the Bolan pass picked up again. There was Pirak (1700–700 BC), established near Sibi on the Kachi, and a few settlements with a similar material culture to Pirak have been mapped near this route. Significantly, at Pirak, with its new pottery forms and house types, and new crops – *jowar* and rice, there also occurred evidence of the horse and the two-humped camel, and also some lapis lazuli.

AH Dani (1992) gives a graphic description of the Gomal plain in the post-Harappan period. This route should not be neglected as a pale reflection of the famous Bolan route. At the foot of the Suleiman range, and the Bhattani and Marwat-Kundi ranges, this is a very well-watered plain, ‘idyllic for human colonization’ in the chalcolithic period and bronze age. There was a connection also with the Bannu basin further north, and between 3400 and 2800 BC the Tochi-Gomal post Neolithic culture flourished here (Naseem and Jan 2016). It appears that later, some migrants had come down the Gomal pass towards the Indus and their dead were buried in unique funerary structures within large pits. There was pure earth put in at the base; remains of sacrificed animals, etc., over this; wood and earth again; and then the remains of a dead person with grave offerings, covered with clay. The whole was set afire and then left intact, a veritable funerary pyre-cum-grave. In a later period, which was the Iron Age, entire skeletons were interred flat but with their heads tilted and the legs flexed with one knee over the other upper leg with one arm crossed over the body as well. The mouth was, strangely, always wide open. The later burial types were excavated not only in the Gomal plain but also in the Potwar plateau near Taxila (Dani 1992: 399–401). No settlement mounds are mentioned by Dani. Were these the funerary remains of seasonally active animal herders from the uplands? We can make no inference about their origins as no mention has been made of horses or wheels or camels.

4. Agricultural dispersals in the post-Harappan period

An interesting phenomenon that warns us against any fixation on long-distance immigrations, is changes in crops after the Harappan period. David Reich writes (2018: 126) that ‘Indian’ farming is a product of a ‘collision’ between the western Asiatic farming economy and that from China with rice and millet (which would be *Panicum*). He omits consideration of the millets, *jowar*, *bajri* and *ragi*, crops native to Africa, the first two observed in the Ethiopian highlands. Has attention been paid to the comparative DNA of groups in northeastern Africa? It does not appear so.

The change in cropping patterns is very important: in contrast to dense stands of wheat and barley on the fields of the great river valleys of Egypt, Iraq and Pakistan–India, the small-grained millet does not produce substantial calories per hectare. But millets have shorter growing seasons, adapted to the time of onset of the monsoons, and can grow on thin soils that are not particularly fertile. They can intercrop with legumes. Said KL Mehra (2003), it is growers of such crops who could disperse to small villages in a settlement pattern contrasting with the dense clustering of agricultural lands in the urban periods of the great river valley civilizations. This, he says, could have been a first Green Revolution in dryland farming. So here it is dispersal and colonization rather than immigration that is the issue.

5. A trail down the Peninsula

Kodumanal, an exceptional site on the Noyyar tributary of the Kaveri river, is located in the Palghat Gap, a highway from west to east, connecting the west and east coasts of peninsular India as it narrows in the deep south. It is a late Iron Age cum Early Historic site, occupied, say, 500 BC onwards. The cultural development that preceded this period was an Early Iron age marked by prolific building of monuments to the dead (often in extensive cemeteries) in permanent stone in contrast to the villages of the living people which were unprepossessing structures in mud, leaves, wood and thatch. There was farming and herding as also pottery, and iron production – of a similar range of weapons and tools. How could this Megalithic Culture of peninsular India, stretching from Vidarbha in central India to the Tamraparni river in the deep south, have in its grave offerings for the dead similar types of iron tools and weapons?

I do not have an answer and can only repeat some observations of Elwin in *The Agaria* (1942). He found that Agaria was a name for ‘many different iron smelters’ in central India. He said they do not form one homogeneous tribe but have diversities of customs and names, even though they share a common mythology and technology. He asks (1942: 8), ‘Are the Agaria a separate tribe, which came into existence in an age when iron was invented?’ Or ‘are they members of different tribes who have taken to iron smelting?’ A significant fact that Elwin records is that there was no private property in the iron ores (magnetite, limonite, etc.) that have been located, mined and smelted by the Agaria as equipment for their co-villagers who were largely the members of other tribes, or less frequently, for the peasantry.

Across the pit circles of the Vidarbha megalithic region, an area of about 150 km from west to east, a frequent archaeological find was the horse, or horse trappings, or else long thrust weapons usable only by the horse rider. For instance, three skeletons of horses together with a 1.5 m long lance could be found in a burial. There were horse teeth in other sites. Stone circles with pit burials (always secondary) in their midst, iron artefacts and weapons, and Black and

Red pottery delineated a culture of Vidarbha, according to SB Deo. Horse-rider burials (with a horse or with horse trappings, or secondarily with long iron thrust weapons which only a cavalry would need) were found in the Godavari valley, near Hyderabad, near the Penner river, in the Bhima-Krishna valleys, on the Tamil coastal plain in Chingleput district, at Kodumanal, and further south to the site of Adichanallur on the Tamraparni. To return to Kodumanal, here too surrounding a large village with craft industries and iron production were pit circles with horse remains, horse bits and stirrups.

A clue to the intrusive nature of the pit circles comes from Brahmagiri, where there are 300 or so cist burials but only about a dozen pit circles with long iron lances interspersed among them. Kodumanal is interesting – indeed significant – in other ways. Aside from its crafts and trade, there were two punch marked coins, and a handful of NBP sherds. And K Rajan (2015) found 550 inscribed sherds in the occupation strata: it was personal names that were inscribed in Tamil Brahmi, the majority of them Tamil names, with a few names (Prakrit) of northern Indian men. For K Rajan, the Brahmi script here was pre-Asokan and Prakritization was a cultural – rather than political – phenomenon.

Whatever the final interpretation of the written alphabet and its social context, I would like to stress here that horseback warriors did penetrate the deep south, and it cannot be denied that this is indeed a cultural trait distinctive of the Indo-Iranian (if not Indo-European) people.

6. Bilingualism and language replacement

As the hypothesis of the Indo-European languages and their spread is a product of the historical linguists, I would like to end with linguistics, with apologies as it is not my academic field. In 1956 MB Emeneau wrote about the northwestern frontier of South Asia where many linguistic features were shared by groups because of a prolonged and close bilingualism that resulted in the sharing of vocabulary, sounds and grammar. An immigration of Indo-Aryan speakers with their horses and military superiority may have driven some Dravidian speakers south in the long term, but there was also acculturation. Because of prolonged contact, Sanskrit absorbed the retroflexes of Dravidian languages. Emeneau says that Sanskrit was Dravidianized because many Sanskrit-speakers learned the language from native speakers of Dravidian languages. For MM Deshpande, Dravidian-born persons were reciting the Rgveda: There was an ‘increasingly Dravidianized oral transmission of the Rgveda text’. (Hoch (1975: 78,87) had said there could have been influence from Munda languages as well.) We should not forget, however, the massive Sanskrit influence on Tamil as the centuries went by.

MM Deshpande states (2006: 137) that ‘retroflexion in the existing recension [of Sayana] of the Rgveda needs to be explained in terms of an increasingly Dravidianized oral

transmission of the text’. Observing that there was massive convergence, HH Hoch for his part looked for words and speech phrases and other grammatical borrowings. Edwin Bryant (1999) disputes some of the theories of borrowings but, it appears to me, his focus is more on loanwords and grammatical influence than retroflexion. He argues for the possibility of an adstratum.

7. Summary

I have mentioned evidence for immigration (Swat and the Kachi plain), for possible herder winter camps in Pakistan, for the spread (dispersal) of farming populations when they took to millet dry cropping, and for an awe-inspiring trail of horseback warriors down the peninsula from central India. What language the people spoke is never going to be proved. It must be stressed, however, that the coming of Sanskrit was not solely a matter of immigration. Indo-Iranian linguistics does not appear to be a matter of phylogeny⁷ alone. There was interaction across speech communities and in many cases there was language replacement towards the language of prestige or a language of greater numbers of people, or ritual efficacy, if not prowess in war.

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⁷ This is an exercise in tracing the ancestors of a language or a couple of languages and suggesting which the ancestor language was – the ancestor of that ancestral language may also be identified.

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