



Commentary

On Trails, footprints, hoofprints By Shereen Ratnagar

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The title of the paper by Shereen Ratnagar itself is majestic and very skillfully portrays what it proposes to communicate. The author begins by clearly charting out her task for this paper, i.e. providing an archaeological perspective on the human origins, diversity and migrations. In other words, she makes an attempt to trace human antiquity in the perspective of archaeology.

Past societies, cultures and environment are described and analyzed with the theoretical conceptual entities of archaeology for the benefit of the reader.

The author then shifts to a discussion on how the term *Adivasi* has been used in India to mean the original inhabitants of a particular place in lieu of the alternative term, 'tribe', which according to her may not be a suitable option. She expresses her feeling of dissatisfaction in respect of the existing criteria of ascribing a population to be the autochthones. Furthermore, the fact remains that defining populations, tribal or such other categories, by their existing popularly or administratively known names may sometimes be very fuzzy. She mentions the nomenclature 'Bhil' for those who live in the eastern Gujarat and she asserts that the tribal people who are called Bhils objected this term themselves and preferred to be called Rathwa, Naikda, or Dhanuk. It is to be mentioned here that many tribal groups have faced similar problems in India. Lepchas, a tribal population inhabiting the Sikkim–Darjeeling areas, for example, prefer to call themselves 'Rong', although popularly and administratively they are called Lepchas. It is to be noted, however, that ethno-historical data for the population should also be collected for a better understanding of the population migration and such relevant issues. In the introductory section, the author opines that archaeology is not sufficiently helpful in narrating migration history of ethnic groups and less so in the case of language groups.

The author then turns to narrate through six subsections important aspects of archaeological accounts pertaining to (i) the earliest known Indo-Europeans, (ii) the Indo-Iranian homeland, (iii) trails down the Northwestern mountain passes into the Greater Indus Valley, (iv) agricultural dispersals in the post-Harappan period, (v) trails down the peninsula, and finally (vi) bilingualism and language replacement with a purpose of examining migration of population groups along with their cultural traits on the one hand, and social inter-relationships among migrant and local populations on the other.

It is observed that the Hittites, considered to be the earliest known Indo-Europeans, began to rule the land of Hatti with a language known as 'Hittite' or 'Nashili', as called by its speakers, which is supposedly one of the earliest branches of Indo-European languages. The land did have advanced culture and technology, too. Again, the Mitannians, contemporaries of the Hittites, were the rulers of a northern Syrian State and spoke Hurrian language. It is further observed that a treaty between the Hittites and Mitannians occurred and the oath-taking by the latter was done by some Vedic deities, implying Vedic connections. Scholars opined that during this period in Syria, the presence of a multi-cultural society persisted, which was headed by the Mitannian elites.

The homeland for the Indo-Iranians was suggested to be in the northern Iran–Central Asia–Hindukush uplands. Migrations occurred around 2000 BC from these places to Syria, India and later to Iran. And it was also thought that these migrations of various groups were gradual in nature; horse-mounted incursions happening at a later period, though. It has been noted that two closest members of Indo-European family of languages, i.e. Vedic and Avestan, were spoken by these people. Both Iranians and Rgvedic people called themselves *Arya*. It appears that the steppe land of Eurasia was homeland of the Indo-Europeans as a whole. Archaeological evidences support the view that the steppe having grasslands and perennial rivers is characterized by an early stage of economic and cultural development around 5000 BC. Horse hunting was a regular practice and burial chambers were found where horses were sometimes buried with individual persons. The author observed that the domestication of the horse in the fourth millennium Botai in Northern Kazakhstan was clearly evident. Furthermore, appearance of Sintashta, a settlement and cemetery located in the east of Urals, as a subculture of Andronovo culture, around

2000 BC, as well as cultural traits such as kurgans, use of horses, Bactrian camels, light chariots marked by spoked wheel, weaponry and warrior elites characterized the Indo-Iranian homeland.

The author then narrates the significance of the trails down the Northwestern mountain passes into the greater Indus valley and the role played by the Bolan Pass through which footprints of various groups of people ranging from armies, adventurers, traders, and even pastoralists and their flocks were evidenced. Mehrgarh, the earliest known Neolithic site of South Asia on the Kachi plain terminus of Bolan Pass, grew in population, craft technologies and trade; regular annual visits to the locale by the herdsman must have been a catalytic factor, as believed by the author. It appears that gradual cultural and economic exchanges between the locals and the herdsman were necessary. There remains evidence, it is observed, of the appearance and development of many cultural traits, viz. Quetta pottery and lapis lazuli beads in Mehrgarh and its surrounding archaeological sites. However, during the Harappan era, settlements along the Bolan Pass were abandoned; interestingly, during the post-Harappan era, establishments of settlements (e.g., Pirak) near Sibi and the Kachi plain with newer developments of pottery forms, house types and crops, along with horse and two-humped camel, were archaeologically evidenced. On a similar token, the archaeological importance of Gommal Plain has also been highlighted in the post-Harappan period. The author considers changes in crop patterns after the Harappan period for better understanding of agricultural dispersal.

In order to provide archaeological evidence concerning trailing down to the Peninsular India, the author makes mention of several archaeological sites. One such was Kodumanal, located on the Noyyar tributary of the Kaveri river, believed to be a Late Iron Age cum Early Historic site. Examination of its cultural material raised several interesting questions. Furthermore, it is also noted that across the pit circles of the Vidarbha megalithic region, archaeological finds included ample evidence of presence of horse, and in Kodumanal, too, such evidences exist. On the basis of appropriate archaeological finds, she argues in favor of penetration of horseback warriors in the deep South. And she points out that engaging in war on horseback has been one of the distinctive cultural traits of the Indo-Iranian people.

Finally, the author has shed some light on the issue of bilingualism and language replacement as observed by authors in the field of linguistics in respect of the spread of Indo-European languages. It has been sufficiently evident that acculturation in terms of language use occurred between Indo-Aryan speakers and Dravidian speakers. Sanskrit, belonging to the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European family, absorbed language traits (e.g. retroflex) from the Dravidian speakers, owing to prolonged contact.

Ratnagar in this paper restricts her discussion competently to archaeological as well as linguistic observations to determine population migration, acculturation and related issues showcasing the Indo-Europeans, more specifically Indo-Iranians, and highlights important facts pertaining to their origin and specific migration history, techno-cultural development, economic issues and linguistic interactions in a lucid style. The evidence-based arguments placed in this paper remain acceptable, to my understanding. Her article makes interesting reading.

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