



Commentary

On Early 'Aryans' and their neighbors outside and inside India By M Witzel

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The convergence of the scientific currents of archaeology, linguistics and human genetics in dealing with the existence of the early Aryan people, that has been dealt with in this article, is a testimony to a qualitative interdisciplinary approach to the topic. By 'Aryans', here we mean the speakers of Indo-Aryan languages. Keeping in view the established parlance of the history of linguistic science (with special reference to India), the data fetched from the Vedic literature undoubtedly stands as the one and the only textual evidence regarding the presence of the Aryans and the establishment of the Aryan civilization. Philological evidence has suggested beyond all reasonable doubt that there was an influx of Aryan speakers into India, even though there are no written documents to substantiate this. The postulation of Indo-Iranian branch (of the Indo-European family of languages), to which belongs the Iranian, Indo-Aryan and Dardic, linguistically establishes a stage where Iranian and Indo-Aryan-speaking people had a common speech, and that the common region of the Indo-Iranian people has been located somewhere in Iran or south-eastern part of Mesopotamia. The reconstruction of Indo-Iranian was done by comparing the morpho-phonological structures as attested in the Avestan (Av.) texts, Old Persian (OP) texts and Old Indo-Aryan (OIA) (Vedic Sanskrit) texts, keeping in view the sound laws – their divergence and convergence. Some instances (Banerjee SR 1987 *A Handbook of Sanskrit Philology*. Calcutta: Sanskrit Book Depot (P) Ltd.) can be cited in this regard.

Phonological rule: The Indo-European (IE) sonant nasals $m, n > a (m/n)$ in Indo-Iranian (Iir.).

e.g. IE. **kṛntom* > Iir. **satam*, Av. *satəm*, OIA. *sátam*

Phonological rule: The Indo-European (IE) long vowels $\bar{a}, \bar{e}, \bar{o}$, and short vowels $\check{a}, \check{e}, \check{o}$ became short \check{a} and long \bar{a} in Indo-Iranian (Iir.)

e.g. IE. **mātēr* > Iir. **mātā* > OIA *mātā*, OP. *mātā*, Grk. *mātēr*

Linguistics being a natural science and grammar, being most scientific among the traditional sciences (Staal JF 1974 The origin and development of linguistics in India; in *Studies in the History of linguistics: Traditions and paradigms* D Hymes (ed.) Bloomington: Indiana University Press), the insight of studying the phonological affinity across the languages and the proof of cognates as key concepts of linguistic divergence from a common source substantiates the linguistic relationship of Old Indo-Aryan with Avestan and Old Persian. Such an exercise also traces the time of separation of Iranian and Indo-Aryan as sometime between 1750 to 1500 B.C.

Of the Indo-European languages, Sanskrit (in the form of Vedic literature) is one of the oldest members, which originated in Europe. The only possible way by which a language belonging to the Indo-European language family could be carried all the way to India was a migration of the people speaking the language (in its earlier form). (Burrow T 1975 The Early Aryans; in *A cultural history of India* AL Basham (ed.) Oxford: Oxford University Press) 'The Aryans whose presence in north western India is documented by the Rigveda had reached the territory they then occupied through a migration or rather a succession of migration from outside Indian subcontinent. The final stage of this migration cannot have been very far removed from the beginning of the composition of Rigveda' (*ibid* Burrow 1975 p 20).

The study of the languages of the substrate cultures and their existent in the region truly bears the potential to focus the issue with more objectivity, which is yet to be attempted methodically and exhaustively. In the issue of linguistic substratum, the observation of Suniti Kumar Chatterji (Chatterji SK 1951 *Kirata-Jana-Kriti. The Indo-Mongoloids: Their Contribution to the History and Culture of India* p.4. Kolkata: The Asiatic Society) can be cited: 'Sanskrit in its origin is an Aryan or

Indo-European language, as we all know. But in its evolution on the soil of India, the non-Aryan peoples had a share in its development – in determining its tendencies and its history, helping to change its phonetics and its grammar and to modify and add to its vocabulary. It was thus a joint product of both Aryan and non-Aryan, so that it could become by 500 B.C. the most natural vehicle of a composite Indian-Aryan-cum-non-Aryan-Culture'. Chatterji (1951, p 14) further mentions, 'The Austric-speaking *Niṣādas*, and the Dravidian speaking *Dāsa-Dasyus* – these two groups were most in evidence throughout the greater part of India. There were, and there still are, solid *blocs* of Dravidian-speakers in Western and Southern India: and proto-Australoid (*Niṣādas*) elements are strong among them. The riverain tracts of North India were originally probably inhabited by Austro-Asiatic (Austric-speaking) tribes. But Dravidian penetration into Austric tracts appears to have been both extensive and deep. The *Burushaski* speech, of unknown affinity, has been connected with the Caucasian speeches on the one hand, and with the Austric on the other; and if the latter affiliation is correct, then that would show that Kashmir and part of North-western India at any rate were also settled in by Austric speakers'.

The position of Rajbangsi as mentioned in the article as one of the remnant and substrate languages needs clarification. We know that the title 'Rajbangsi' (meaning 'those having royal lineage') was adopted by a group of Koch people in north Bengal in the process of 'Aryanization' or 'Hinduisation' (as the Koch kings were the great patrons of Hinduism). This took place in order to distinguish themselves as original and superior to the other neighbouring communities which were undergoing assimilation with the Koch community, in favour of royal patronage. Chatterji (*ibid* 1951:112) says, 'The masses of the North-Bengal areas are very largely of Boḍo origin, or mixed Austric-Dravidian-Mongoloid, where groups of peoples from lower Bengal (*Bhāṭī-dēś*) and Bihar have penetrated among them. They can now mainly be described as *Koch*, i.e., Hinduised or Semi-Hinduised Boḍo who have abandoned their original Tibeto-Burman speech and have adopted the Northern dialect of Bengali (which has a close affinity with Assamese): and when they are a little too conscious of their Hindu religion and culture and retain at the same time vague memory of the glories of their people, particularly during the days of Viśva Siṃha and Nara-nārāyaṇa, they are proud to call themselves *Rāj-baṃśīs* and to claim to be called *Kshatriyas*;...'.

In the concluding line of the paper it is mentioned that 'The *puruṣa sūkta* of Ṛgveda 10.90 with its division of society into four classes still is the unwritten but effective constitution of India'. It seems to be an overstatement without any substantial evidence. Therefore, an elaboration of the concluding line of the paper, which speaks of the presence of four classes (a social division as found in Rigveda) as 'still is the unwritten but effective constitution of India', is a desideratum for its substantiation.

However, the journalistic notion/hype with which the deliberation opens undoubtedly falls short of any evidence on which a theory as vital as the existence of the Aryan population inside and outside India can be authenticated. Agreeing with M Witzel, such notions seems to be nothing but journalistic hype.

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