

Review Article

History of Aryan Invasions to Aryan Migrations

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When the link between the various languages of the Indo-European family was first discovered, it was automatically assumed that languages are spread primarily by groups of intruding invaders. Since the homeland of the IE languages was already placed outside India, it was proposed that a group of IA speaking invaders (who were derived from PIE speakers) had invaded India sometime in the middle of the 2nd millennium B.C., imposing their language on the 'Dravidian' and on the other non-Aryan aboriginal inhabitants of India, by force. With archaeology in its infancy, the proof for these invasions was discovered in the Rigveda. Uncritical, erroneous and tendentious interpretations of the text were relied upon to conclude that European looking Aryans had subdued dark, short, snub nosed non-IE speaking natives of India militarily and had imposed the IE languages on them[1].

As more and more historic and pre-historic sites came to be studied and excavated by archaeologists, it was naturally expected that traces of such destructive invasions of the Aryans would be unearthed in plenty. Then, in the 1920's [Possehl 1999:38-154; Kenoyer 1998:20-25], the ruins of a hitherto unknown civilization were identified/found spread across the Indus Valley in what is now Sindh and lower Punjab. The Bronze Age culture, somewhat contemporaneous with the great Bronze Age cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia, was named 'Indus Valley Civilization (IVC)' because most of the sites were located in the area drained by the Indus and its tributaries. It is also called 'Harappan culture' because it is a convention in archaeology to name excavated cultures after its first site that is excavated. After British India's independence in 1947 and the birth of Pakistan, archaeologists in independent India found several hundred sites along the dried bed of the Ghaggar (ancient Sarasvati river) and Chautang (ancient Drshadvati), in Gujarat and adjacent areas. Some sites have even been found east of the Yamuna in its higher reaches. Currently, the IVC area is said to have more than

2600 sites associated with Harappan culture, although not even 2% of them have been excavated completely. The excavated sites however are distributed over the entire area of IVC and may be taken as representative of the IVC per se.

The discovery of the IVC led to an inversion of one of the older paradigms concerning AIT. In the earlier versions of AIT, it was assumed that the ancient, aboriginal inhabitants of India were a primitive people with a low level of culture and that the superior invading Aryans made them civilized. This perception of 'aboriginal Indians' did not seem to match the sophistication seen in the urban planning and organization of the Harappan cities that were excavated. So, the nomadic Aryan invaders were now deemed as destroyers of the advanced Bronze Age Harappan Civilization, heralding a dark age of cultural stagnation for several centuries before the rise of the sixteen Mahajanapadas and numerous other Janapadas around 600 BCE. Thus, instead of being discarded, the AIT was simply imposed on the new discoveries in its new avatar. The IVC was now identified as that Indian, non-Aryan civilization which was destroyed by the invading, nomadic, primitive Aryans. By tendentious logic and without any proof, the IVC was equated with Dravidian culture [2] (where Dravidian as an over-arching category had been invented in the 19th century to include speakers of Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Tulu, Kodagu, Malto and other languages of peninsular India).

Naturally then, as the IVC sites were further excavated, tell tale signs of the destructive fury of the Aryan invaders were sought. Ratnagar [2000:30-31], has neatly summarized the kind of tell-tale evidence generally encountered when sites destroyed by violent incursions (leading to a hurried departure of its inhabitants) are excavated by archaeologists:

a) burnt buildings with their fixtures and appointments during use still in place, though charred or broken. Items

that were to be baked may remain stacked near a kiln that was never lit, as at Ugarit (Drower 1968). The tip of a spearhead may be found embedded in a piece of wood (Shahr-i Sokhta). A child's scarred skeleton may be found clutching some object and lying under fallen roof logs (Shahr-i Sokta, Tosi 1983:88).

b) jars set in floors can be seen to have broken there, so that they can be reconstructed from their pieces. The shards on the floor of a hurriedly abandoned room will tend to give the parts of entire pots that were in use in that structure (Godin Tepe, Weiss and Young 1975)

c) walls with signs of recent repair or plaster

d) craft items left half finished at the place of manufacture as at Ugarit (Drower 1968)

e) valuables or culturally significant items, of no use to the destroyers or to subsequent squatters, used in ways never intended. After destroying Ugarit its pillagers used some clay tables inscribed with religious texts to support shanty walls (ibid). At Dholavira, a vandalized stone statue came to support a wall.

f) valuables or culturally significant items like a religious emblems or statuary or rulers' inscriptions smashed or defaced

g) the dead hurriedly buried in non-customary spots or ways

h) safely or secretly deposited wealth items left behind in the rush to flee the enemy. That these were secreted wealth and not votive offerings or ritual building foundation placements will be indicated by disturbed floor paving.

i) W. Adams (1968) points out that evidence of burning is not by itself proof of attack or invasion. Residents may burn down houses because of vermin or disease. But in a kind of classic instance of attack, at Tepe Hissar in north-eastern Iran (a settlement which will be of relevance to our argument) we find several signs, such as burned and charred walls, recently renewed plaster, charred roofing material, a post-hole with charred wood remains, a number of flint arrowheads in the vicinity of the building, metal weapons, and crushed skeletal remains. There were also spills of charred wheat and a storage room with fifteen large pots crushed by roof collapse (Schmidt 1937:155-171). This burnt building at Hissar presents an archaeological situation in total contrast to the evacuated palace at Tell Brak. Most situations, however, fall somewhere between these extremes.

There is however another possibility that the Aryans were invaders but they did not cause destruction to the IVC

cities because the IVC inhabitants fled the approaching invaders. Ratnagar [2000:31-32] again summarizes the archaeological record of such quick abandonments that took place without violence or destruction:

a) grain remaining in storage jars or silos

b) charcoal remaining in fireplaces

c) half-finished craft work, associated tools and raw materials remaining in workshop areas

d) pottery (broken or intact) recovered in individual households representing the entire range required for domestic use

e) clean-swept house floors and courtyards

f) the figurine or emblem of a family deity in its place in the home

g) thick (say 30 cm) layers of roof collapse on disused floors showing that roofs were not salvaged and subsequently fell in (Schlanger and Wilshusen 1993:92-3)

h) buried wealth left un-retrieved (?)

i) usable items left behind, these being obviously not part of the day-to-day refuse of a family.

If the Aryans had indeed invaded the IVC area, bringing an end to this great Bronze-Age Civilization, we would have seen one or more of the above scenarios attested in the archaeological record. Strangely however, this was not the case. Rather, the excavated sites presented a picture of gradual abandonment in general. There were distinct signs of a cultural decay, a collapse of urban society probably accompanied by periods of internal strife, a breakdown of social and political systems. This evidence of a collapse of the IVC due to causes other than any large scale invasions from the north west has been studied in detail by Ratnagar [2000], and others and would be summarized by me elsewhere. The net conclusion from the archaeological record of the demise of IVC can be stated in the following words of Kenoyer [1998]

Contrary to the common notion that Indo-Aryan speaking peoples invaded the subcontinent and obliterated the culture of the Indus people; we now believe that there was no outright invasion; the decline of the Indus cities was the result of many complex factors. [pg. 19]

...there is no archaeological or biological evidence for invasions or mass migrations into the Indus Valley between the end of the Harappan phase, about 1900 B.C. and the beginning of the Early Historic Period around 600

B.C. [pg. 174]

Likewise, Romila Thapar[3], an eminent Marxist historian of India also states [2000:82]:

There is virtually no evidence of the invasion and the conquest of northwestern India by a dominant culture coming from across the border. Most sites register a gradual change of archaeological cultures. Where there is evidence of destruction and burning it could as easily have been a local activity and is not indicative of a large-scale invasion. The borderlands of the northwest were in communication with Iran and Central Asia even before the Harappa culture with evidence of the passage of goods and ideas across the region. This situation continued into later times and if seen in this light when the intermittent arrival of groups of Indo-European speakers in the northwest, perhaps as pastoralists or farmers or itinerant traders, would pose little problem. It is equally possible that in some cases local languages became Indo-Europeanized through contact.

It must be emphasized that elsewhere, for instance in Aegean and the Near East [Drews 1988], the violent destruction and succession of older Bronze Age cultures by invading IE speakers is clearly attested in an archaeological record of the type that has been described by Ratnagar [4] above.

It is pertinent to note here that the use of iron played an important role in the older versions of the Aryan Invasion Theory. It was proposed that the Aryans invaded India with their superior and stronger iron weapons and were therefore able to overpower the inhabitants of the Indus Valley Culture and the Neolithic tribals of the Ganga basin further east. Moreover, the invading Aryans were said to have used iron axes for clearing the dense forests of the Ganga basin, promoting agriculture with the accompaniment of the 'Aryanization' of the region. Such reconstructions of the Indian past were based partly on fantasy, partly on an uncritical reading of the Rigveda, and finally, on certain reprehensible ideologies as mentioned above. Most archaeologists as well as many Indologists have now rejected such simplistic invasionist scenarios. Erdosy [1995:83-84] summarizes the argument:

The traditional view, that iron was brought into the subcontinent by invading 'Aryans' (Banerjee 1965), is wrong on two counts: there is no evidence of any knowledge of iron in the earliest Vedic texts (Pleiner 1971), where *ayas* stands either for copper or for metals in general, and the idea that the Aryans of the Rigveda were invaders has become just as questionable. Wheeler's assertion that iron only spread to India with the eastward extension of Achaemenid rule (Wheeler 1962) is even

more untenable in the face of radiocarbon dates from early iron-bearing levels. The alternative thesis (Chakrabarti 1977), that iron smelting was developed in the subcontinent, rests on two principal arguments. First, iron ore is found across the length and the breadth of India, outside alluvial plains, in quantities that were certainly viable for exploitation by the primitive methods observable even in this century (Ball 1881; Elwin 1942).

Ample opportunities thus existed for experimentation, although given the complexity of iron smelting this is not a conclusive point. The second argument, that the earliest evidence for iron comes from the peninsula and not from the northwest, is much more persuasive, even if better examples than quoted by Chakrabarti can be adduced in support of it. Briefly, while the dating of Phase II of Nagda (the earliest iron bearing level) depends on ceramic analogies, and the stratigraphy of Ahar (another site which is claimed to have produced evidence for iron) is hopelessly muddled, the testimony of radiocarbon dates is instructive. Iron Age levels have yielded dates of 2970 + 105 bp (TF-570) 1255, 1240, 1221 cal. BC and 2820 + 100 bp (TF-573) 993 cal. BC from Hallur, and 2905 +105 bp (TF-326) 1096 cal. BC and 3130 + 105 bp (TF-324) 1420 cal. BC from Eran. They are not only earlier than any date from the Ganga valley (which dates fall between 2700-2500 bp) but are also earlier than the dates from Pirak in the northwest, with the exception of an anomalous reading of 2970 + 140 (Ly-1643) 1255, 1240, 1221 cal. BC. Since the process of diffusion from the west should produce rather the opposite pattern, a strong case can be made for an indigenous origin of iron smelting, although it could do with further support given the complexity of this industrial process which by common consent renders multiple centers of innovation unlikely.

Thus, another bedrock of the Aryan Invasion Theory has thus been knocked off, leading the field open to other scenarios like the Aryan Migration Theory. However, the use of iron technology is now sometimes used to explain the later spread of 'Aryanism' in the Ganga plains by the Aryan Migrants, as we shall see below.

In the end, it must be pointed out that, some archaeological findings in the IVC area are still cited to suggest that barbarians coming from the northwest overwhelmed at least parts of that civilization. Communist Historian D. N. Jha [1998:40] for instance, summarizes:

At several places in north Baluchistan thick layers of burning have been taken to imply the violent destruction of whole settlements by fire. Indirect evidence of the displacement of Harappans by peoples from the west is available from several places. To the south-west of the citadel at Harappa, for example, a cemetery, known as

Cemetery H, has come to light. It is believed to have belonged to an alien people who destroyed the older Harappa. At Chanhudaro also evidence of the superimposition of barbarian life is available.

Mercifully, these few incidents have not been used to resuscitate the full blown AIT. Thus Jha, who subscribes to AMT, [1998:40] concludes:

Interestingly, even the Rigveda, the earliest text of the Aryans contains references to the destruction of cities of the non-Aryans. All this may imply that the 'invaders' were the horse riding barbarians of the Indo-Aryan linguistic stock who may have come from Iran through the hills. But neither the archaeological nor the linguistic evidence proves convincingly that there was a mass-scale confrontation between the Harappans and the Aryans who came to India, most probably in several waves.

The reason for the above conclusion is that the archaeological and anthropological record is overwhelmingly opposed to the invasion scenarios. The decline of the IVC is now attributed to or related to a combination of a host of factors: desiccation of the Sarasvati river, shifting of river courses, flooding in the lower reaches of Indus, environmental degradation caused by over-exploitation of natural resources (forests, grazing land), climatic changes (decline in rainfall), cultural decay, decline in the metal trade with Mesopotamia, internal social and political strife, epidemics, an over-expansion of the geographical area covered by the IVC and even a prolonged drought lasting over three centuries.

I must caution the reader that all this does not imply that AIT is dead. Quite to the contrary, it has been used in recent times and is still being used by mainstream Indologists and scholars belonging to other disciplines to explain various facets of Indian civilization, culture, religion and history. For the laity then, the AIT is obviously the gospel truth.

NOTES:-

1. See Hock [1999:149-156] and Vaidya Ramagopal Shastri's monograph *Veda mein Arya dasa yuddha sambandhi paschatya mata ka khandana* (Ramalal Kapoor Trust; Sonapat, Haryana). See also the following on-line article by Koenraad Elst on the literary evidence for <http://koenraadelst.voiceofdharma.com/articles/aid/urheimat.html>

[2] Recently however, Michael Witzel has proposed that the Saptasindhu region was most probably inhabited by the 'para-Mundas', an Austro-Asiatic speaking group. He points out that the Dravidian loan words are extremely

rare in the earlier strata of the Rigveda, and start appearing only in the middle and late levels of the text. See his online article named 'Substrate Languages in Old Indo-Aryan' available on-line in 4 parts at <http://northshore.shore.net/%7Eindia/ejvs/issues.html>

[3] Romila Thapar was one of the first Indian historians who rejected the AIT in favor of migration scenarios – a viewpoint to which she still subscribes. She opposes all attempts to equate IVC with the Vedas vehemently.

[4] Professor Shireen Ratnagar is a Professor of Ancient Indian History and Archaeology at the Centre for Historical Research in New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). The JNU is considered a bastion of Marxist thought in India. Ratnagar holds that the migration of Aryans into India took in such a manner that no archaeological evidence of these migrations should be expected [1999].