

Challenging the Aryan Invasion Theory: A Critical Examination of the Evidence

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Abstract

This study examines the Aryan Invasion/Migration Theory, which posits that the Indo-Aryan peoples and languages originated outside the Indian subcontinent and later invaded or migrated into the region. The origins of this theory during the British colonial era are explored, as well as its propagation by colonial administrators and Christian missionaries as a means to create divisions and justify the colonial rule. The theory's role in perpetuating a narrative of racial and cultural conflict between supposed "Aryan" and "Dravidian" groups is critically analyzed. However, the central focus is on the significant challenges this theory faces from multiple lines of evidence in modern-day independent India. Archaeological findings, such as those at sites like Rakhigarhi and Sinauli, reveal the existence of an indigenous warrior culture with chariots and weapons, contradicting the idea of Aryan invaders introducing these elements. Linguistic evidence points to deep connections between Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages, undermining the notion of a sharp divide and suggesting prolonged interaction rather than conflict. Furthermore, genetic studies increasingly challenge the idea of a massive Aryan migration, as modern Indian genetic diversity reflects complex migrations and admixtures over time. The study ultimately calls for a more inclusive, decolonized understanding of Indian history and origins, acknowledging the diverse cultural, linguistic, and genetic contributions from various sources within the region. It emphasizes the need to move away from divisive narratives perpetuated for colonial agendas and reclaim the study of Indian origins through an indigenous lens.

Keywords: Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT); Aryan Migration Theory (AMT); Dravidian.

1. Introduction

Studying history provides crucial context for understanding the present, tracing the origins of modern ideas, conflicts, and societal structures. It allows us to learn from past mistakes and successes, avoiding repetition of errors while replicating effective strategies. History preserves cultural identity and heritage, connecting communities to their roots and traditions. It cultivates critical thinking skills like analyzing evidence, evaluating perspectives, and synthesizing information. Moreover, studying history fosters empathy and understanding of diverse peoples and cultures over time. Ultimately, it serves as a tool for shaping the future by comprehending historical patterns and trends to make informed decisions. History equips us with knowledge and abilities to navigate complexities, create an enlightened future, and appreciate our roots. In this study, the Aryan invasion theory (AIT) or Aryan migration theory (AMT) is being investigated. Its origin, its propagation and the challenges it faces in modern day independent India.

1.1 The Origin and Propagation of AIT/AMT

In the late 18th-19th Century, Europeans started learning the Sanskrit language. They started formulating the history of Indians, i.e. our history. "It is language and religion that make a people, but religion is even a more powerful agent than language", wrote Friedrich Max Muller. European interest in Sanskrit grew in the late 18th-19th century, leading to comparative studies between Sanskrit and other Indo-European languages. Scholars like Franz Bopp and Max Muller proposed that the similarities between these languages suggested a common ancestral Aryan language and people who migrated from outside India. Muller's translation of the Rig Veda and his lectures on the "Science of Language" popularized the idea of tracing the history of the "Aryan race" through language studies. The AIT/AMT proposed that Aryan migrants from Central Asia invaded and subjugated the indigenous Dravidian/Indus Valley populations in India around 1500-1000 BCE. This theory aligned with colonial narratives and Eurocentric perspectives that depicted the "Aryans" as a superior civilization introducing advanced culture to India. Muller's formulation of the AIT/AMT was influenced by contemporary social, political, and religious debates, as well as efforts to establish a unified "scientific" understanding of world religions and cultures [1].

1.1.1 Brahmo Samaj

Keshub Chandra Sen emerged as a prominent leader within the Brahmo Samaj, significantly recognized for his oratory skills and leadership. His lecture on April 8, 1863, titled "The Brahmo Samaj Vindicated" clearly delineated his stance against both native opponents and Christian missionaries. Over time, influenced by Unitarian preacher Charles Dall, Keshub leaned towards Christianity, leading to his proclamation of the Eastern roots of Christ. This inclination attracted

scrutiny from both Christian missionaries and the British government. Notably, Sir John Lawrence, the Viceroy, saw Keshub's favorable mentions of Christ as evidence of his potential conversion to Christianity. Keshub's 1870 visit to England was marked by significant interest and reception. Victorian England, grappling with a tension between spirituality and materialism, viewed Keshub as a potential restorer of spiritual balance. His engagement with high-profile figures, including Queen Victoria, and the enthusiastic response from various towns underscored his acceptance and the anticipation that he might convert to Christianity.

Missionary and Governmental Support: Prominent figures such as Sir Bartle Frere and Baptist Rev. Samuel Cox perceived Brahmo Samaj as a transitional stage towards Christianity, with Keshub as a key proponent. His alignment with Christian ideals without formal conversion kept alive hopes of his eventual embrace of Christianity, reflecting the broader missionary strategy of gradual assimilation. **Max Muller's Role and Perspective:** Max Muller, a German-born philologist and Orientalist, had strong ties to the Brahmo Samaj leaders and was a firm supporter of Keshub. Muller admired the Brahmo Samaj's efforts to reform Hinduism and saw Keshub as instrumental in potentially Christianizing India. Muller's correspondence with Keshub and other leaders reflected his belief in the superiority of Christianity and his hope for a universal religion emerging from the Brahmo Samaj's reforms. Muller also viewed the Brahmo Samaj as a promising vehicle for spreading Christianity in India. He supported Keshub's initiatives, noting their potential to blend Eastern and Western religious ideals into a new, universal faith. Muller's advocacy for this syncretism was part of a broader Victorian missionary agenda that saw European civilization and Christianity as superior models for other cultures.

Keshub's Synthesis and Broader Impact: Keshub Chandra Sen's vision extended beyond mere religious reform; he sought to create a universal religion by integrating elements from Christianity, Islam, and Zoroastrianism. He emphasized the Asiatic origins of Christ to foster a deeper connection between Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. This approach resonated with the scientific racial theories of the time, which posited a common origin for Europeans and Asians. His efforts were seen as a way to elevate Indian religious thought to align with Christian principles without completely abandoning Hindu cultural identity. Despite the differing expectations of missionaries and his broader vision, his influence was undeniable. His ability to engage the educated elite and his synthesis of diverse religious ideas positioned him as a pivotal figure in the religious and cultural dialogues of his time. The support and interest he garnered from both Indian and British circles underscored the complex interplay of religious, cultural, and colonial dynamics in 19th-century India [2].

1.1.2 Christian Missionaries:

Christian missions in India faced significant challenges and experienced varying degrees of success over time. Here are the key points: The early Christian missionaries like St. Thomas and those during the British East India Company era had limited success, facing opposition from local rulers and the formidable barrier of “intellectual Hinduism” as noted by Abbe Dubois. Efforts to immerse in native customs by missionaries like De Nobili initially met resistance from evangelical orthodoxy. Translating the Bible into local languages also revealed deeply ingrained prejudices. The scenario improved when English-educated Indians engaged in social reform movements, creating an opportunity for dialogue with missionaries. Scottish missionaries promoting English education also prepared the ground. In the 1840s, there was a perceived threat to Hinduism from Christian proselytization, leading to opposition from Brahmins and other elite groups. The Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT), propagated by scholars like Max Muller, gained traction and was seized upon by different reform movements and colonial rulers, though for different reasons. Christian missionaries, unable to persuade Brahmo leaders to convert, ironically adopted and promoted the AIT as a strategy, despite Muller facing opposition in England for his views on the evolution of religion. The missionaries adopted a two-pronged approach, targeting upper-caste elites with the AIT narrative and focusing on conversions among lower castes, achieving mixed success in the latter group but largely failing with the former. Overall, the ambitious plans of widespread conversion fell short, as Christian missions grappled with intellectual Hinduism, native customs, and the complexities of social reform movements and colonial dynamics.

2. Evidence against the Aryan Invasion Theory

2.1 Archaeological Evidence

The archaeological evidence cited in support of the AIT is also subject to debate and alternative interpretations. The decline of the Indus Valley Civilization, often linked to the proposed Aryan invasion, has been attributed to various factors, including climate change, environmental degradation, and internal socio-economic transformations. Furthermore, the archaeological record does not provide clear evidence of a violent invasion or subjugation of the indigenous populations. The cultural continuities observed in the archaeological record suggest a more gradual process of cultural exchange and assimilation, rather than a sudden and disruptive invasion. Archaeological findings from sites like Kalibangan, Banawali, and Lothal reveal the presence of fire altars, lingam worship, and other symbols and practices that are central to later Hinduism. These discoveries suggest a continuity between the Indus-Sarasvati civilization and the Vedic culture, rather than a break or invasion [3]. Furthermore, the Rig-Veda contains

numerous hymns praising the river Sarasvati, which has been identified as the now-dried-up Ghaggar-Hakra river system that was a major part of the Indus-Sarasvati civilization.

The Sarasvati River was part of the 'Sapta Sindhu' - a group of seven mighty rivers. Geological records indicate that the river flowed vigorously during the late Pleistocene glaciation, around 6000 to 4000 B.C. The river originated from the Himalayas, specifically from the Bandapunch massif, and flowed through regions that are now part of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Gujarat, eventually draining into the Arabian Sea at the Great Rann of Kutch. This connection between the Vedic literature and the archaeological remains challenges the notion of an Aryan invasion from outside the subcontinent [4]. According to the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), recent excavations from the nearly 4,000-year-old archaeological site in Sinauli, where a warrior tribe lived around 1900 BCE, provide evidence that challenges the Aryan invasion theory. Western scholars had proposed that chariots and weapons came to India with the Aryan invasion, which changed society. However as shown in figure 1, the Sinauli excavation contradicts this notion, as they have uncovered evidence of indigenous burials of warriors, weapons, and chariots [5].



Figure 1: The chariot (left) and the copper swords (right) found at the excavation site in Sinauli near New Delhi, India. Pic credit: ASI

2.2 Linguistic Inconsistencies

One of the primary arguments against the AIT is the linguistic inconsistencies it presents. While the theory relies heavily on the similarities between Sanskrit and other Indo-European languages, it fails to account for the presence of non-Indo-European language families in the Indian subcontinent, such as Dravidian and Austroasiatic. These language families have deep roots in the region, predating the proposed Aryan migration timeline. Moreover, the linguistic evidence used to support the AIT has been criticized for its selective interpretation and lack of consideration for the complex linguistic diversity within the Indian subcontinent. Alternative theories, such as the Indigenous Aryan Theory, propose that the Indo-Aryan languages evolved locally, challenging the notion of a foreign origin. There linguistic connections between Sanskrit and Dravidian languages, as pointed out by Indian scholars like R. Swaminatha Aiyar and C. Narayana Rao. These researchers found significant similarities and connections between the two

language families, suggesting a common origin or prolonged interaction, rather than a sharp divide between the so-called Aryan and Dravidian cultures [3]. The Sangam literature of Tamil Nadu, dating back to the early centuries CE, shows a harmonious coexistence of Vedic, Puranic, and non-Vedic deities, further undermining the idea of a sectarian divide between the Aryan and Dravidian cultures. Sri Aurobindo, in his work "The Secret of the Veda", challenged the theory of a North-South racial and linguistic divide in India by demonstrating the close connections and common origins between Sanskrit and the Dravidian language Tamil [6].

2.3 Genetic Complexities

While genetic studies have been used to support the AIT by tracing ancestral lineages to Central Asia and the Steppe region, the interpretation of these findings is not straightforward. The genetic makeup of modern Indians is highly complex, reflecting multiple waves of migrations and admixtures over thousands of years. Critics argue that the genetic evidence alone is insufficient to conclusively support the AIT, as it fails to account for the diverse genetic contributions from various sources, including indigenous populations and other migratory groups. The genetic data may be better explained by alternative models of population movements and interactions. The recent study published in *Cell*, one of the world's top journals – not only sets aside the Aryan migration theory but also notes that the hunter-gatherers of Southeast Asia changed into farming communities of their own and were the authors of the Harappan civilisation [7].

2.4 Alternative Theories and Perspectives

In light of these challenges, alternative theories and perspectives have emerged, offering different interpretations of the available evidence. The Indigenous Aryan Theory, for instance, proposes that the Indo-Aryan culture and languages originated within the Indian subcontinent, challenging the notion of a foreign invasion or migration. Other theories, such as the Anatolian hypothesis, suggest that the Indo-European languages may have originated in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) and spread through various migration routes, including the Indian subcontinent. These alternative theories highlight the need for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of Indian history and origins, taking into account the diverse cultural, linguistic, and genetic contributions from various sources.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Aryan Invasion Theory faces significant challenges from multiple lines of evidence, including archaeology, linguistics, literature, genetics, and alternative theories. The theory presents an oversimplified and divisive narrative that fails to capture the complexities of

Indian history and origins. Archaeological findings suggest cultural continuities rather than a violent invasion which might have this ploy of Aryan theory to get propagated easily. Linguistic evidence points to deep connections between Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages and hence the Aryan theory is found to be not correct based on language differences. Rather, Literary sources depict a harmonious coexistence of diverse traditions. Genetic studies reflect complex migrations and admixtures over time. Alternative theories, like the Indigenous Aryan Theory and Anatolian hypothesis, offer different perspectives on the origins of Indo-European cultures, challenging the notion of a foreign invasion. The critique calls for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of Indian origins, acknowledging diverse cultural, linguistic, and genetic contributions, and moving away from divisive narratives perpetuated for political agendas. By drawing upon archaeological, linguistic, and literary sources, the study suggests a continuity between the Indus-Sarasvati civilization and the Vedic culture, undermining the validity of the Aryan invasion theory. It also critiques the motivations behind the propagation of this theory and its continued perpetuation by certain groups. Ultimately, the study of Indian history and origins must be reclaimed and reframed through an indigenous, decolonized perspective that can celebrate the rich tapestry of traditions, cultures, and peoples that have shaped the subcontinent over millennia. Only then can we truly appreciate the depth and continuity of Indian civilization, free from the constraints of externally imposed theories and biases.

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