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HISTORY

The Nationalists Try – But India Remains Among the World's Oldest Melting Pots

A frequent strawman approach by 'Out of India' proponents is to cast alternative theories as an attempt by Westerners to make Indian culture subordinate to a 'superior' one brought over by fair-skinned invaders.



The archaeological site of Harappa, of the Indus Valley civilisation. Photo: Sara Jiani/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0



Ram Kelkar



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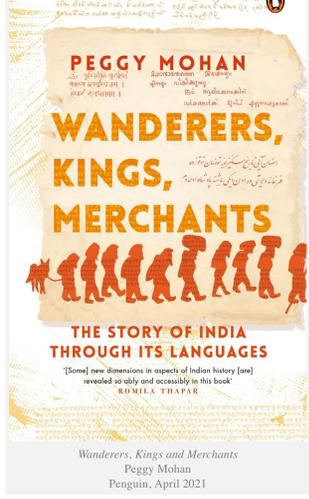
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The US may well have “*E pluribus unum*” as its motto, Latin for “Out of many, one”, but the Indian subcontinent is arguably the largest melting pot of the world. Waves of outsiders came to India, but instead of *veni vidi vici*, in Julius Caesar’s famous words, it has been a case of *veni vidi mansi*. They came, they saw and they stayed in India, blending into the glorious melting pot that is the subcontinent.

Two new books published in 2021 delve into the fascinating story of how India and Indians evolved over the centuries, building upon and impacted by domestic and migrant influences. *Wanderers, Kings, Merchants – The Story of India Through Its Languages* by Peggy Mohan focuses on linguistics and the study of languages, including early Sanskrit, the rise of Urdu and language formation in the Northeast of India. Meanwhile, *Indians: A Brief History of A Civilization* by Namit Arora takes us on a journey through the history of India by visiting six places including Dholavira, Nagarjunakonda, Nalanda, Khajuraho, Hampi and Varanasi. He also includes several chapters about visitors to India including Megasthenes, Faxian, Xuanzang, Alberuni and Marco Polo.



The theme of these well-researched books aligns with the findings of research papers across various scientific disciplines by reputable scientists, that at some time in the first half of the second millennium BC, descendants of Steppe pastoralists entered South Asia from the north. These migrants blended with the local population and provided somewhere in the neighbourhood of 30% of the gene pool of the Indian population today. They also brought proto-Sanskrit, an Indo-European language, into the sub-continent and this language eventually blended with local languages to create today’s polyglot India.

Prof David Reich, the famous geneticist and author of *Who We Are and How We Got Here* (2018), believes there were multiple ‘collisions’ that formed the present day Indian population – including the most recent mixture of people in the Indus Valley civilisation cline with people from the northern latitudes, carrying Steppe ancestry, after the decline of the mature Indus Valley

civilisation around 4,000-2,000 years ago.

This hypothesis is often called the Aryan migration theory (AMT), to contrast it with the indigenous Aryans theory (IAT) and the ‘Out of India’ theory (OIT). OIT proponents posit – without any genetic, archaeological or linguistic evidence – that Vedic and Paranic culture originated in India, and that Aryans from the hoary past are strictly indigenous to the Indian subcontinent. Further, they claim that Indo-European languages radiated out of India, and deny any global roots for this family of languages.

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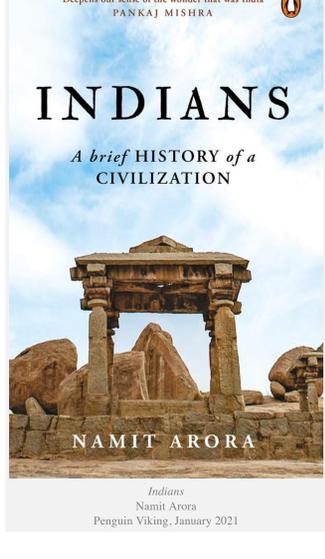
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A frequent strawman approach by OIT proponents is to mislabel the AMT as the IAT, and cast these theories as an attempt by Westerners from the time of Max Mueller to make Indian culture subordinate to a superior culture brought over by fair-skinned invaders. This argument about an invasion has also been used by others to justify claims about various caste groupings, and the evils of the caste system. Making matters worse, the Nazis, out of their ignorance and fanaticism, stigmatised the very term “Aryan” forever, creating the myth of a “master race”.

For some, OIT is important to defend the claim that “undoubtedly, therefore, we ... have been in undisputed and undisturbed possession of this land for over eight or even ten thousand years before the land was invaded by any foreign race,” as written by M.S. Golwalkar in *We or Our Nationhood Defined* (1938).

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“The ‘Out of India’ theory was motivated by bad politics rather than by good scholarship,” Namit Arora has said, adding that the “controversy” about Aryan migration was never an honest disagreement among scholars. He adds that the massive weight of evidence from linguistics, philology, and archaeology has long favoured what’s now being proven or refined by population archaeogenetics.

The nationalists have spared no efforts to raise generalised doubts about scholarly papers and research about the AMT without offering any cogent argument based on facts, and research grounded in the scientific method. It’s easier to question theories proposed by thoughtful researchers which always come with caveats. Meanwhile, OIT proponents fail to offer any logical and scientific evidence for their claims, and rely solely on questioning AMT and offering up anecdotal evidence based on religious texts and oral traditions that cannot stand up to scientific scrutiny.

It is pertinent to note that the authors of the scientific papers that support AMT are not “biased” Western researchers out to demean India’s history, but belong to Indian archaeological and genetic research centres – including Deccan College, Pune; Birbal Sahni Institute of Palaeosciences, Lucknow; Amity Institute of Biotechnology Noida; and CSIR-Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad.

A 2013 paper in *Cell* entitled “Genetic Evidence for Recent Population Mixture in India,” by David Reich et al, emphatically states, based on genetic evidence, that most Indians descend from a mixture of two genetically divergent populations, called ancestral north Indians, related to Central Asians, Middle Easterners, Caucasians and Europeans; and ancestral south Indians (ASI), not closely related to groups outside the subcontinent. Archaeological and linguistic studies provide further support for these genetic findings about Indians being a blend of at least two very distinct populations.

A subsequent paper, also in *Cell*, by Vasant Shinde et al in 2019, entitled “Ancient Harappan Genome Lacks Ancestry from Steppe Pastoralists or Iranian Farmers,” became fodder for the nationalist propaganda machine because it was mistakenly viewed as evidence against AMT. The fact that the Indus Valley civilisation, which predates the Steppe people’s migration, did not have any ancestry from Steppe pastoralists does not prove in any sense that there was no migration. In fact, the same paper also states that “a natural route for Indo-European languages to have spread into South Asia is from Eastern Europe via Central Asia in the first half of the 2nd millennium BCE, a chain of transmission that did occur as has been documented in detail with ancient DNA.”

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Articles in Indian media misrepresented the paper and included headlines, such as “New DNA study challenges Aryan invasion theory”, quoting Shinde as saying that the paper “demolishes the hypothesis about mass human migration during Harappan time” – a true statement which does not contradict AMT happening at a later date, leaving aside the mislabeling of migration as “invasion”.

Later, another paper in *Science* published in 2019, entitled “The formation of human populations in South and Central Asia”, provided further evidence in support of the migration of Yamnaya Steppe pastoralist ancestry into India. The paper found that “Steppe migration ... integrated further south in the first half of the second millennium BCE, contributing up to 30% of the ancestry of modern groups in South Asia.” After the decline of the Indus Valley civilisation, the local population in the Indian subcontinent intermixed with northwestern groups with Steppe ancestry to form the “ancestral north Indians”. And they also mixed with southeastern groups to form the “ancestral south Indians”.



Steppe pastoralists migrating from Russia mixed with people of the Indus valley civilisation to contribute to Ancient South Indians while the Ancient South Indians derived their ancestry primarily from Indus valley populations. Image: Narasimhan et al, 2018

In his book, Namit Arora points out that Harappan seals never showed horses; equine imagery only appears in the subcontinent after the collapse of the Indus Valley civilisation. This would suggest that the horse culture must have arrived along with the Aryans from Central Asia. The language and religion of these migrants brought over proto-Sanskrit and proto-Vedas, and Vedic gods such as Indra, Mitra, and Varuna and fire worship, which is similar to the practices of their Aryan brethren in Iran. They blended in with the local population and with local religious practices, with gods like Shiva-Parvati and Ganesha.

In *Wanderers, Kings, Merchants*, Peggy Mohan delves into the sounds and structures of the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages, and notes that the Sanskrit of the Vedas did not originally have retroflex consonants. Drawing on the work of University of Michigan linguist Madhav Deshpande, it would appear that “proto-Sanskrit” evolved by incorporating elements of local Indian languages. Further, Deshpande’s linguistic research suggests that the developments are a result of convergence and not of forcible subversion, which is significant since it indicates that the social relationship between Indo-Aryan and Dravidian speakers in early India was one of equality, rather than “Indo-Aryan invaders suppressing an indigenous Dravidian population and forcing it to learn their language”.

Meanwhile, genetics research into the origins of the Yamnaya or Proto-Indo-European culture continues to march forward. A recent paper, published in April 2021 in the journal *Cell*, suggests that proto-Greek and Indo-European languages originated in Anatolia or the Pontic-Caspian Steppe region.

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All evidence and research therefore points to India being the world’s largest, if not first, melting pot, with both the genetic pool and the languages and culture resulting from a blend of migrants over time with preexisting indigenous populations. *E pluribus unum* is the reality in both the world’s oldest and largest democracies.

Ram Kelkar is a Chicago-based columnist who works for a privately held investment firm.

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