

Dear Dr. Steve Farmer,

About a month ago, I happened to read your response of February 28, 2009 to Dr. Doris Srinivasan contained in http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Indo-Eurasian_research/message/12174. Being occupied on other fronts, I could not so far convey that your response is based on faulty information and shows little appreciation of the uncertainties of early Indian history and hence of the need to respect differing views. You use unnecessarily harsh language and come across as more anxious to make your readership less receptive to differing views than to offer a report or critique in keeping with the usual academic standards. Your post lacks fairness and contributes to creating an unhealthy situation in which 'who is saying' becomes more important than 'what is being said' or 'why something is being said.'

You denounce the Sindhu-Sarasvati Civilization Conference [the title in the printed program is: "Sindhu-Sarasvati Valley Civilization: a Reappraisal"] as follows:

(a) "We've [We =?] been receiving reports on the Conference ... they don't have anything to do with legitimate research."

(b) "We [=?] don't want discussion of premodern studies fixed around pseudo-historical issues driven by contemporary S. Asian political agendas."

(c) "The papers ... are pretty funny. ... mess ... snippets from a few of the papers, most of which are amusing (read: idiotic and amateurish) crap indeed ... "Sindhu-Sarasvati Civilization" nonsense ... They flew this guy [= Nicholas Kazanas] in from Greece to present this crap?"

The harshness of your language is obvious. So, without giving that aspect any more space, let me come to the substance of what you have said and point out how inapplicable the judgments you have passed are. The following scholars discussed the specified topics in the Conference:

Edwin Bryant (Rutgers University): "Intellectual history of the debate [regarding 'indigenous : non-indigenous' Aryans and the Indo-European homeland; cf. the abstract]."

Jim Shaffer (Case Western Reserve University): "The Harappan Diaspora and South Asian Archaeology."

Ashok Aklujkar (University of British Columbia): "Sarasvati drowned: rescuing her from scholarly whirlpools" or, if you must stick to the wording in the printed program, "Linguistic evidence for Sarasvati in the Rig Veda; Sarasvati drowned."

Nicholas Kazanas (Omilos Meleton Cultural Institute): "The Rig Veda predates the Sindhu-Sarasvati Culture."

Jonathan Mark Kenoyer (University of Wisconsin): "Continuity and change during the Late Harappan Period: new discoveries from Pakistan and India." [Professor Kenoyer also made a short voluntary presentation toward the end of the Conference, informing the audience about where uncertainties or differences of views exist in the overall

anthropological theory (genes-based research etc.) and about the efforts being made to improve the conditions for archaeological research, roughly, in the western half of north India (e.g., greater collaboration between Indian and Pakistani specialists, despite the political problems between the two countries.]

Shiva Bajpai (California State University, Northridge): “Sapta-Sindhu: geographical identification and its historical significance.”

Prem Kishore Saint (California State University, Fullerton): “Paleohydrology of the Sindhu-Sarasvati Civilization river systems.”

Bisht, R.S. (Archaeological Survey of India): “Dholavira: a unique Harappan City.”

Kak, Subhash (Oklahoma State University): “Space, time and narrative in ancient India.”

Item (a) in what I have quoted from you above implies that the topics of the reports you received, that is, the papers that were read and the exchanges that took place at the Conference, concerned something other than “legitimate research.” In (b), you speak of the same as being concerned with “pseudo-historical issues.” I do not think that, after reading the titles of papers given above, even moderately informed readers would offer the characterization you have offered. Almost every one of the topics has been an object of scholarly scrutiny for decades, a few for more than a century. If they do not fall in the area of legitimate research or are pseudo-historical, you must have a very different understanding of “legitimate” and “non-pseudo.” Or your expectation regarding what falls under ‘Sindhu-Sarasvati Civilization’ or ‘Indus Valley Civilization’ must be very different. (There is no clarification of the understanding or expectation in your post.)

Since you are not on record as considering the Indus Valley Civilization research as illegitimate, your view may be that as soon as the word “Indus” is vedicized, or the word “Sarasvati” is used along with “Sindhu/Indus Valley Civilization,” or a reappraisal is proposed in the title, a conference loses its legitimacy or connection with real issues. But I do not believe that you would be so colonial in your thinking as to get upset over the preference of some scholars for a word form actually found in the primary sources (“Sindhu”) over an anglicized word form (“Indus”). Nor is it likely, with the new archaeological discoveries being made in Pakistan and India in areas not too far from the Indus area -- generally in the western half of pre-partition north India, that you would deem a reappraisal of the Sindhu/Indus Valley Civilization utterly lacking in justification. The word that aroused your wrath can, therefore, only be “Sarasvati.” But why should even that be the case? It is an obvious ground reality that the sites brought to light by excavations that have taken place in north India over the last few decades lie in what could very well be the general area of the river Sarasvati. Scholars may disagree about the identity of Sarasvati with a specific modern river, about the exact course the river followed, about whether the name “Sarasvati” is borrowed from a region to the northwest of pre-partition India, about the number of sites actually close to the accepted course, about the number of sites in the north and the south of the course, about whether the river had its origin in the Himalayas, about whether the river was glacier-fed, about how

closely or exactly the newly discovered sites are related to the Indus-Harappa sites, and so on. However, no scholar worth the appellation has, as far as I can determine, taken the position that the new sites cannot at all be related to the Indus-Harappa sites or are beyond the area associable with Sarasvati. If, in this state of research, some scholars wish to study the Sindhu-Sarasvati area together, what is so objectionable about it? Why should the inclusion of Sarasvati be an anathema?

It seems that you have criticized the theme selected for the Conference the way you have because you are convinced that the opposite of what the Conference organizers selected has already been proved beyond doubt. However, such a conviction does not suit the reality of research concerning ancient India. There the uncertainties far outnumber certainties. Extensive reconstructions based on slender pieces of evidence have frequently been attempted as you yourself must have felt in working on the Indus signs. Also, do you really think that all or even most of the participants mentioned above would have agreed to participate if they had not seen any possibility of saying something different, new or constructive in the area of scholarship concerned?

Your overconfident or rigid mold of thinking, indicated by my preceding observations, is in keeping with the fact that, even in the case of the serious charge implicit in “pseudo-historical issues driven by contemporary S. Asian political agendas,” casting a shadow on the professional integrity of the participants, you have not felt the need to give any supporting evidence. The participants have South Asian as well as non-South Asian backgrounds. Almost all of the ones who are originally from South Asia have lived outside of South Asia for decades without any proven political involvement. Each one of them is secure in his/her academic position. At least a few of them can be said to have earned trust or respect in the academic world. Do you really think it probable that all of them would explore “pseudo-historical issues driven by contemporary S. Asian political agendas”? That you do not really think so is indicated by the question you raise: “ why a few legitimate researchers -- ... (like Kenoyer) --... show up to give their papers side-by-side with Hindutva hacks?” If you can entertain the possibility of difference among the participants, why did you tarnish all the participants with the demeaning remark quoted at the beginning of this paragraph? To lump the (real or perceived) ‘opposition’ together, overlooking its internal differences, is not expected of a true historian. Is it not something one expects primarily in the case of Hindutva advocates who do not do their ‘homework’ and declare all Western Indologists to be racists or think of all of them as prompted by some questionable ulterior motive?

I also did not expect you to criticize some participating scholars merely on the basis of their abstracts. You cannot possibly be unaware of the fact of life that presenters occasionally change the details, focus or emphasis of their abstracts. Professor Shiva Bajpai indeed had sent a differently worded abstract that could not get into the circulated program. However, under either version of the abstract, one would expect him to give evidence for the assertions made in the abstract and to show awareness of competing

views or possibilities. This is what he in fact did. His paper was much more nuanced and original than what your satirical remarks convey. He dealt with at least three different understandings of Sapta Sindhu. He also took into consideration the possibility that the expression “sapta” connoted sacredness and not a specific number. Further, toward the end of his talk, he suggested that the expanded application of “sapta sindhu” might indicate an expanding political power. In the same section he emphasized, probably in view of the largely non-specialist audience, that the word “Hindu” is a geographical term and not the name of a religion in the period concerned. Now, if one is convinced about the truth of the AIT view and does not see an east-to-west expansion as probable, one may ignore Bajpai or refute him (on the basis of primary evidence), but one should not think of him as refuted by such prejudice-generating introductory remarks as “Shiva Bajpai, whom the RSS-backed “Hindu Education Foundation“ initially conned the California Department of Education into being appointed as an official textbook advisor to the State -- Bajpai’s long links to the Hindu right are unambiguous and well-known -- gives us this little gem ...“ I do not know if the information you convey about Professor Bajpai is valid. Nor do I need to know, for it is irrelevant and cannot be a substitute for a reasoned counter-argument based on what Bajpai actually wrote or said. It saddens me that you attempt to condemn someone by association. Do you not think that we have had enough of this strategy in the Indus-Sarasvati or AIT-OIT debates?

This brings me to the remarks you pass on Dr. Nicholas Kazanas’ paper. You tell us that Professor Witzel “deconstructed“ Kazanas’ work “in hilarious fashion in the Journal of Indo-European Studies (JHS) a few years ago“ and that his paper offered “a familiar if ridiculous argument made for modern political reasons.“ I do not know what a researcher living in Greece would gain by risking his scholarly integrity or believability for reasons of Indian politics. However, I do know that the worth of his paper should not be judged by that charge or by the talk of N.S. Rajaram in the same context (another attempt at suggesting ‘guilty by association’). All that Kazanas’ paper did was to offer textual and archaeological evidence and to use the conclusions of another scholar who had worked on the texts from an astronomical angle. It would have been fair to criticize him and the scholar whose work he used by pointing out misinterpretations or uncertainties, but you do not do that. Instead of attacking the message, you attack the messenger and, against the advice you (rightly) give to others, you essentially stop at invoking authority. Dr. Kazanas has responded to Professor Witzel’s comments in the Journal of Indo-European Studies (2003) and on http://www.omilosmeleton.gr/en/indology_en.asp in what I, as someone knowing a thing or two about linguistics, consider a scientifically defensible or plausible way. Comparative-historical Indo-European linguistics is not, in theory or practice, a field where one view must always be at the expense of another view.

Since you create the impression that the Sindhu-Sarasvati Civilization Conference was some kind of communal back-patting event of persons who are not scientific enough, let me also mention that, in addition to the two scholars you criticize specifically, almost

all other participants gave free expression to their reservations, differing emphases and mutual disagreements, that there were two panel discussions in which the audience asked all kinds of questions and offered positive as well as negative comments, that, although the conference was organized in honor of Mr. S.R. Rao, Professor Kenoyer felt free to state that he himself did not regard the Indus signs as deciphered and that, when Mr. Bisht of the Archaeological Survey of India was asked a question about the Rama-setu -- a question that had nothing to do with the Conference theme -- he had no hesitation in saying that there was no real or built setu; it was just a natural formation. Note also that Professor Kenoyer, to whose credentials you seem to attach some value, obviously thought of the audience and fellow participants as worthy of receiving complex and latest information. Otherwise, he would not have spent his time and energy in making a second presentation.

Further, I did not expect it of a historian who earned my admiration by questioning and systematically pursuing the scripthood of Indus signs that he would assume lack of integrity on the part of all LMU Conference participants or suggest that “legitimate researchers“ who participate in such conferences do so to “take the sponsors‘ money.“ The latter is particularly a misuse of rhetorical skills. The conference lasted for only a day and half. The paper presenters were accommodated in a modest hotel and private residences for two nights. To call the conference “expensive“ is not in keeping with reality.

You also drop the hint that there was something improper in organizing a conference in honor of Mr. S.R. Rao. Shikaripur Ranganatha Rao has given nearly fifty years of his life to the service of Indian archaeology. It is, rightly, common in many academic disciplines to celebrate the dedicated work of a colleague even if one does accept his conclusions. Behind this magnanimous way of thinking stands the awareness that most of us do the best we can in different circumstances of historical research. Is this way a part of your intellectual make-up? I hope it is. In any case, please note that Mr. Rao did not read a paper at the Conference. He was present and was a model of decorum and modesty. Except for a few questions and answers, a video of his interview was the only way in which he participated in the formal proceedings of the Conference.

If even after what I have written above, you wish to accept your informant’s statement as the only truth, you are, of course, free to do so. It must have been rather inconvenient or frustrating to you that the informant does not get into details and expresses just about the same general opinions as you do elsewhere in the post. I was amused by his/her remark: “I have been studying the Indus Valley civilizations for 40+ years now with some noted scholars and have never heard such Sa[ns?]kritam as I did from this conference.“ Either all the scholars studying with the informant must be speaking Sanskrit, or the Indus Valley must be revealing its secrets to him/her and his/her study buddies in Sanskrit. As someone who has formally taught Sanskrit for at least 47 years and spoken it for about 51 years, let me assure you that there was nothing very strange with the Sanskrit heard at the

LMU Conference. There were a few regional styles of pronunciation and occasional understandable influences of the modern vernaculars. Among the non-Indians, Mr. Kazanas had an impeccable pronunciation.

You can verify all this, preferably in the company of your informant, by watching the filmed proceedings of the Conference when they become available.

I have no intention of continuing this discussion and wish that the subject would have allowed me to write a shorter communication. I hope that the sincere and honest part of your personality will prevail. I admire your energy, far-ranging curiosity and ability to enter new fields of study easily. However, you need to consider the possibility that Indology as a system may need a less closed mind. The best course of action in the present situation would be to revert repeatedly to primary sources, to ensure that one's use of a particular piece of evidence is not vitiated by circularity --- that it does not presuppose even indirectly or implicitly the reconstruction of history one prefers, and to distinguish between those treatments of inconvenient or problematic pieces of evidence which simply rationalize and those treatments of such pieces which really amount to being an argument against the opposing view.

With good wishes,

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