

'Edmund Leach on Racism & Indology' by S Kak

Our narratives about the past are scraps of evidence joined with the glue of imagination. So there can be many narratives and many retellings as the vocabulary changes with time. This is all ancient history can be and we should be satisfied with that. It is sensible to accept that our reconstructions of the past are subjective.

But what does one do if a narrative is at variance with the evidence and yet, because of endless repetition, it has become entrenched in popular imagination as well as scholarly discourse? And what if such a narrative is accepted as the only truth?

Here I am talking of the fabrication of the narrative of Aryan invasions of the 2nd millennium BC. All evidence we have goes against it: There is biological continuity in the skeletal record for 4500-800 BC; the archaeological record has been seen to belong to the same cultural tradition from 7000 BC to historical times; the literary texts know of no other geography but that of India; and so on. Furthermore, the texts remember several astronomical events that took place during 5000 BC to 1000 BC; they also state that the Sarasvati flowed to the sea, which is memory of a period prior to 2000 BC, because we now know that the river dried up around that time. Here it is not my intention to review the evidence for which broad consensus exists amongst archaeologists.

So what should we do if some textbooks continue to repeat this fabrication? There are those who say that history doesn't matter and so let's not worry about what the books say and in due course better books will be published.

Maybe true. But isn't it foolish to let wrong things be taught in schools and colleges? How does it help education if we assault the intelligence of the youth and tell them something to be a fact for which there is no evidence?

Indology and Racism

It is bad enough if a fabrication-- a story-- is palmed off as the truth, but what if the fabrication is driven not just by poor logic but by racism?

Ten years ago, the distinguished British anthropologist, Edmund Leach, wrote a famous essay on this problem titled "Aryan Invasions Over Four Millennia". Published in a book called "Culture Through Time" (edited by Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, Stanford University Press, 1990), this essay exposed the racist basis of the 19th century construction of Indian prehistory and, perhaps more important for us, it showed how racism persists in the academic approach to the study of India. The implication of Leach's charge is that many of the assumptions at the basis of the academic study of Indian social organization, language development, and evolution of religion are simply wrong! Here are some excerpts from this essay:

Why do serious scholars persist in believing in the Aryan invasions?... Why is this sort of thing attractive? Who finds it attractive? Why has the development of early Sanskrit come to be so dogmatically associated with an Aryan invasion?...

Where the Indo-European philologists are concerned, the invasion argument is tied in with their assumption that if a particular language is identified as having been used in a particular locality at a particular time, no attention need be paid to what was there before; the slate is wiped clean. Obviously, the easiest way to imagine this happening in real life is to have a military conquest that obliterates the previously existing population!

The details of the theory fit in with this racist framework... Because of their commitment to a unilineal segmentary history of language development that needed to be mapped onto the ground, the philologists took it for granted that proto-Indo-Iranian was a language that had originated outside either India or Iran. Hence it followed that the text of the Rig Veda was in a language that was actually spoken by those who introduced this earliest form of Sanskrit into India. From this we derived the myth of the Aryan invasions. QED.

The origin myth of British colonial imperialism helped the elite administrators in the Indian Civil Service to see themselves as bringing 'pure' civilization to a country in which civilization of the most sophisticated (but 'morally corrupt') kind was already nearly 6,000 years old. Here I will only remark that the hold of this myth on the British middle-class imagination is so strong that even today, 44 years after the death of Hitler and 43 years after the creation of an independent India and independent Pakistan, the Aryan invasions of the second millennium BC are still treated as if they were an established fact of history.

In editorial comments, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney summarizes Leach's arguments regarding the fabrication: "Seemingly objective academic endeavors are affected by the *mentalite* of the culture to which they belong. Leach describes how cherished but erroneous assumptions in linguistics and anthropology were accepted without question. If the *mentalite* of the academic culture was in part responsible for the fabrication, geopolitics was even more responsible for upholding the Aryan invasion as history. The theory fit the Western or British vision of their place in the world at the time. The conquest of Asian civilization needed a mythical charter to serve as the moral justification for colonial expansion. Convenient, if not consciously acknowledged, was the Aryan invasion by a fair-skinned people, speaking the so-called Proto-Indo-European language, militarily conquering the dark-skinned, peasant Dasa (Dasyu), who spoke a non-European language and with whom the conquerors lived, as Leach puts it, in a 'system of sexual apartheid.' ...A remarkable case of Orientalism indeed."

The Hegemonic Circle

According to the postmodern theorist Lalita Pandit conventions of history writing are more often than not marked by intellectual bad faith that serves and maintains hegemonic ideologies. She adds, "it is nearly impossible to alter the premises of hegemonic claims, because hegemonies are founded in such retellings, and passing off of myth for fact and history, non-truth for belief. In part at least, all hegemonies are founded in discourses. Discourse conventions are automatically set to deal with exigencies. When a contrary, anti-hegemonic view comes out strong, historiographic conventions, having become habit or mind-sets, are all set to transform the contrary view and absorb into a grand paradigm that ultimately only serves the hegemonic ideology. At the same time, hegemonic institutions are automatically set up to not validate, not give authority to contrary views. After all, what is considered truth is what comes from the horse's mouth, and who decides who this privileged horse, the subject *who knows* the truth is?"

One example of this phenomenon is the interesting strategy devised by the defenders of the Invasion theory to beat back criticism. They say: The critics are Hindu nationalists motivated by political considerations and besides they are not from academic departments.

This is nonsense. The issue is the message and it shouldn't matter who the messenger is. Anyway, this charge that the Invasion/migration theory has been criticised only by independent scholars and nationalists is false. Edmund Leach was not a Hindu nationalist. Neither are Jim Shaffer and Diane Lichtenstein, perhaps the foremost modern scholars of Indian prehistory, who write in a recent essay:

The South Asian archaeological record reviewed here does not support ... any version of the migration/invasion hypothesis. Rather, the physical distribution of sites and artifacts, stratigraphic data, radiometric dates, and geological data can account for the Vedic oral tradition describing an internal cultural discontinuity of indigenous population movement.

Shaffer and Lichtenstein go to the heart of the matter when they further say about the Invasion/migration theories: "[These theories] are significantly diminished by European ethnocentrism, colonialism, racism, and antisemitism. Surely, as South Asian

studies approaches the twenty-first century, it is time to describe emerging data objectively rather than perpetuate interpretations without regard to the data archaeologists have worked so hard to reveal."

A Question of Method

Let's for a moment forget the sorry history of the construction of India's past; Edmund Leach has covered that ground very well in his essay. I am prepared to concede that what Leach called racism in Indic studies may not be obvious to the protagonists. Wearing the blinkers of the tradition in their subspeciality, they may believe that they are merely following in the footsteps of their predecessors.

But if a method is wrong the incremental "advances" in the framework will only lead one more astray. There are many examples of this such as the research during the Lysenko regime in the Soviet Union or the work done by the believers in cold fusion.

The basic error in the Orientalist enterprise of Indian prehistory is the "logic" of apportionment of credit for culture to one "race" or another. It is comparable to the search for Aryan and Jewish components in modern science, the absurdity of which is clear to everyone excepting extremist racist groups.

Yet it has become common in Indic studies to write whole volumes on the discovery of the "Aryan" and "Dravidian" components of Indian culture! Words and cultural ideas that have evolved over all of India are now being examined to find which elements of these are Aryan and Dravidian! These are questions to which no definitive answers can be found. If nothing else this is a colossal waste of academic resources.

There are studies, for example, which trace the caste system to the Indo-European tripartite scheme, and there are still others that trace it to the Dravidian social organization! The Puranas are seen by some to be an organic outgrowth of the Vedic system, and by others to be an expression of the earlier Dravidian Hinduism. This and that of the cultural life are assigned to Aryans and Dravidians with no consistent logic. This list goes on and on.

Edmund Leach ridiculed the method used by Indo-Europeanists. He commended a paper, "Did the Dravidians of India obtain their culture from Aryan immigrant?", written by P.T. Srinivas Iyengar in 1914 (*Anthropos*, vol. 9, pp. 1-15) that clearly shows the propositions of the Invasions/migrationists are "either fictitious or unproved." Iyengar has some fun in the process: "It was reserved for the philologists of the first half of the 19th century to discover that Arya and Dasyu were names of different races. They diligently searched the Veda for indication of this, and their discoveries remind us of the proverbial mouse begotten of the mountain." The philological edifice has been punctured by Swaminathan Aiyar in his remarkable "Dravidian Theories" which appeared in 1975.

Discourse as Theatre

Geertz's eloquent argument, in 1980, for a 'theatre state' interpretation of the Balinese kingdom provides us with a useful insight for the examination of the Indian prehistory paradigm. In a discipline as a theatre, the continuing 'elaborations' of the basic schema are part of a ritual that has nothing to do with the reality of the evidence. Geertz seems to be addressing us when he says, "The state [..is a] metaphysical theatre: theatre designed to express a view of the ultimate nature of reality and, at the same time, to shape the existing conditions of life to be consistent with that reality: that is, theatre to present an ontology of the world and, by presenting it, to make it happen--make it actual."

The theatre of Indian prehistory has likewise moulded the current conditions to conform to its reality. It is not physical force but words and ideas (or shall we call them mantras) that bind people.

In the hour of defeat, the theatre state expired with the *puputans*, the royal parade, with parasols and all, into the fire of the attacking Dutch troops. Is such mass suicide the only end possible for a theatre state? Can there be a peaceful resolution?

Coda

Edmund Leach was a great anthropologist, a sober man, who was for many years a professor at Cambridge and later provost at King's College. He used the charge of racism against Indo-Europeanists deliberately. He said, ``[To] bring about a shift in this entrenched paradigm is like trying to cut down a 300-year-old oak tree with a penknife. But the job will have to be done one day."

Academic study on ancient India will remain ``like a patient etherized upon a table" unless it finds a proper center and fresh energy. This center will be located only as a result of critiques like that of Leach. But what about energy? Will it be provided by the financial support of Indians in the West, who have made enormous fortunes in the electronic and computer industry? I don't think so, at least not in the near future. The racism at the basis of Indic studies, which Indians have experienced in their own education and of which they continue to hear from their children in college, has made them reluctant to support academic programs.

The Aryan affair is, nevertheless, of great interest to the anthropologist. Paraphrasing Leach, one may raise questions like: Why do serious people spend their lives in the elaboration of a racist paradigm? It seems to be like the scholiasts of the Middle Ages spinning volumes on how many angels can rest on the point of a needle!

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