

## The Vedic Evidence

The Vedic Corpus provides no evidence for the so called “Aryan Invasion” of India

Koenraad Elst

The dominant paradigm concerning the presence of the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family is the so-called Aryan invasion theory, which claims that Indo-Aryan was brought into India by “Aryan” invaders from Central Asia at the end of the Harappan period (early 2nd millennium BC). Though the question of Aryan origins was much disputed in the 19th century, the Aryan invasion theory has been so solidly dominant in the past century that attempts to prove it have been extremely rare in recent decades, until the debate flared up again in India after 1990. The main attempt to prove the Aryan invasion (presented in Bernard Sergent : *Genèse de l'Inde*, Paris 1997) uses the archaeological record, which, paradoxically, is invoked with equal confidence by the non-invasionist school (e.g. B.B. Lal : *New Light on the Indus Civilization*, Delhi 1997). Here we will consider the sparse attempts to discover references to the Aryan invasion in Vedic literature, and argue that these have not yielded any such finding.

A first category consists of old but still commonly repeated cases of circular reasoning, e.g. the assumption that the enemies encountered by the tribe with which the Vedic poet identifies, are “aboriginals” (e.g. in Ralph Griffith’s translation *The Hymns of the R̥gveda*, 1889, still commonly used). In fact, there is not one passage where the Vedic authors describe such encounters in terms of “us invaders” vs. “them natives”, even implicitly.

Among more recent attempts, motivated explicitly by the desire to counter the increasing skepticism regarding the Aryan invasion theory, the most precise endeavour to show up an explicit mention of the invasion turns out to be based on mistranslation. Michael Witzel (“R̥gvedic History”, in G. Erdosy, ed.: *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia*, Berlin 1995, p.321) tries to read a line from the “admittedly much later” Baudhāyana Shrauta Sūtra as attesting the Aryan invasion: “Prān ayuh pravavrāja, tasyaite kuru-panchālāh kâshīvidehā ity, etad āyavam, pratyam amāvasus tasyaite gāndhārayas parshavo'rattā ity, etad amāvasyam” (BSS 18.44:397.9). This is rendered by Witzel as: “Ayu went eastwards. His (people) are the Kuru- Panchāla and the Kâshī-Videha. This is the Ayava (migration). (His other people) stayed at home in the West. His people are the Gāndhārī, Parshu and Aratta. This is the Amāvasava (group).”

This passage consists of two halves in parallel, and it is unlikely that in such a construction, the subject of the second half would remain unexpressed, and that terms containing contrastive information (like “migration” as opposed to the alleged non-migration of the other group) would remain unexpressed, all left for future scholars to fill in. It is more likely that a non-contrastive term representing a subject indicated in both statements, is left unexpressed in the second: that exactly is the case with the verb pravavrāja “he went”, meaning “Ayu went” and “Amavasus went”. Amavasus is the subject of the second statement, but Witzel spirits the subject away, leaving the statement

subjectless, and turns it into a verb, “amâ vasu”, “stayed at home”. In fact, the meaning of the sentence is really quite straightforward, and doesn’t require supposing a lot of unexpressed subjects: “Ayu went east, his is the Yamuna-Ganga region”, while “Amavasu went west, his is Afghanistan, Parshu and West Panjab”. Though the then location of “Parshu” (Persia?) is hard to decide, it is definitely a western country, along with the two others named, western from the viewpoint of a people settled near the Saraswati river in what is now Haryana. Far from attesting an eastward movement into India, this text actually speaks of a westward movement towards Central Asia, coupled with a symmetrical eastward movement from India’s demographic centre around the Saraswati basin towards the Ganga basin.

The fact that a world-class specialist has to content himself with a late text like the BSS, and that he has to twist its meaning this much in order to get an invasionist story out of it, suggests that harvesting invasionist information in the oldest literature is very difficult indeed. Witzel claims (op.cit., p.320) that: “Taking a look at the data relating to the immigration of Indo-Aryans into South Asia, one is struck by a number of vague reminiscences of foreign localities and tribes in the R̥gveda, in spite [of] repeated assertions to the contrary in the secondary literature.” But after this promising start, he fails to quote even a single one of those “vague reminiscences”.

On the next page, however, Witzel does mention the ethnonyms of the enemies of the Vedic Aryans, the Dasas (Iranian Dahi, known to Greco-Roman authors as Daai, Dahae), Dasyus (Iranian Dahyu, “tribe”, esp. hostile nomadic tribe) and Panis (Greek Parnoi), as unmistakably the names of Iranian tribes. The identification of these tribes as Iranian has been elaborated by Asko Parpola (“The problem of the Aryans and the Soma”, in Erdosy: op.cit., p.367), and is now well- established, a development which should at least put an end to the talk of the Dasas being “the dark-skinned aboriginals enslaved by the Aryan invaders”.

Unfortunately, Witzel and Parpola project their invasionist notions onto their discovery: they assume that the mentioning of Iranian tribes constitutes a “reminiscence” of the Indo-Aryan sojourn in Central Asia. This is in disregard of the explicit evidence of the geographical data given in the same Vedic texts, which locates the interaction with the Dasas and Dasyus in Panjab. From the identification of the Dasas and Dasyus as Iranians, it could be deduced that these Iranian tribes have lived in India for a while. Of course, this inference might be explained away with the plea that a narrative transfer of geographical setting may have taken place, but that would be a purely external conjecture not supported by the Vedic text itself.

Witzel (op.cit., p.321) makes much of the transfer of geographical names: Sarasvatî, Gomatî, Sarayu, Rasâ are the names of rivers in India as well as in Afghanistan. This is well- known, but what does it prove? The Vedic references to these rivers definitely concern the Indian rivers, not the Afghan ones, e.g. the Vedic description of the Saraswati as “sea- going” does not apply to the Afghan Harahvaitî, which, quite remarkably for a river, does not send its waters to the sea but to a small lake on the Iranian plateau. It is perfectly possible that the names were taken from the Indian metropolis to the Afghan country of emigrant settlement, rather than the other way around.

Another philological argument which keeps on being repeated is the migration-related interpretation of the polysemy of ordinary terms of direction, e.g. dakshina: “south” and

“right- hand side”, pūrva : “east” and “frontside”, pashchima: “west” and “backside”. Since the equivalence of “south” with “right- hand side” presupposes an eastward orientation, it is assumed that this linguistic fact (along with its ritual application of carrying the fire eastward during the Vedic Agnichayana ceremony) “is connected with the eastward expansion of the Vedic Indians through the plains north of the Ganges” (Frits Staal: *Ritual and Mantras*, Delhi 1996, p.154, and to the same effect, Frits Staal: *Zin en Onzin*, Amsterdam 1986, p.310).

This inference assumes that the Vedic Aryans had impressed on such elementary items in their language an association with an eastward movement which must have taken only a small part of their daily routine (even migrants are sedentary much of the time, producing or finding food and other necessities) and a relatively short span in their history. Moreover, it is contradicted by a study of similar polysemic terms in other languages. It is in fact very common to identify the “positive”, solar directions (east, south) with the front side, the “negative” directions (west, north) with the back side. Sometimes, the emphasis is on the north-south axis, e.g. in Chinese, where the character bei, “north”, is derived from the character for “backside”. Likewise, in Sanskrit, utara, “north”, also means “last, final”, while in Avestan, paurva, “frontside”, also means “south”. Otherwise, the emphasis is on the east-west axis, as in Sanskrit pūrva, “east” and “frontside”. Thus, the old Hebrew word yamin means both “right-hand side” and “south” (hence the country name Yemen, the “south” of the Arabian peninsula), this eventhough Abraham had made a westward journey from Ur of the Chaldees in Mesopotamia to the Promised Land. The same polysemy exists in some of the Celtic languages, which had also migrated westward from the central part to the western coasts of Europe. The very word orientation, from Latin, testifies to the natural tendency of taking the orient as the direction of reference.

As for the orientation of the Vedic Agnichayana ritual, if this proves an eastward movement of the Vedic ancestors, what shall we say about the rule that Christian Churches are oriented towards the east, even though Christianity is not particularly associated with any eastward migration? The explanation of the ritual of carrying the fire to the east may be much simpler and of universal application: it symbolizes the underground night journey of the sun from the sunset west to the sunrise east.

Sometimes, invasionist scholars miss the non-invasionist information which is staring them in the face. It is easy to establish on the basis of internal evidence (the genealogy of the composers and of the kings they mention) that the 8th mandala of the Ṛgveda is one of the younger parts of the book. It is there (RV 8:5, 8:46, 8:56) that we find clear reference to the material culture and fauna of Afghanistan, including camels. Michael Witzel duly notes all this (op.cit., p.322), but fails to realize that the invasionist scenario requires that such references appear in the oldest part of the Rg-Veda. What we now have is an indication that the movement went from inside India to the northwest.

Witzel (op.cit., p.324 ff.) makes a beginning with a long-overdue project: establishing the internal chronology of the Ṛgveda on the basis of internal cross-references between kings and poets of different generations. Unfortunately, his first results are rather confused because he does not confine himself to the information actually given in the Ṛgveda, frequently bringing in the “information” (actually conjecture) provided by modern theorists with their invasionist model. By contrast, Shrikant Talageri’s survey of the relative chronology of all Ṛgvedic kings and poets, recently made public in several lectures, has been based exclusively on the internal textual evidence (see Talageri: *The*

Ṛgveda, a Historical Analysis, Delhi, forthcoming), and yields a completely consistent chronology. Its main finding is that the geographical gradient of Vedic Aryan culture in its Ṛgvedic stage is from east to west, with the eastern river Ganga appearing a few times in the older passages (written by the oldest poets mentioning the oldest kings), and the western river Indus appearing in later parts of the book (written by descendants of the oldest poets mentioning descendants of the oldest kings).

The status question is still, more than ever, that the Vedic corpus provides no reference to an immigration of the so-called Vedic Aryans from Central Asia. This need not be taken as sufficient proof that such an invasion never took place, that Indo-Aryan was native to India, and that India is the homeland of the Indo-European language family. Perhaps such an invasion from a non-Indian homeland into India took place at a much earlier date, so that it was forgotten by the time of the composition of the Ṛgveda. But at least, such an “Aryan invasion” cannot be proven from the information provided by the Vedic narrative itself.

© Dr. Koenraad Elst, 2002.