



**THE LANGUAGE THAT CAN NEVER BE :
A CRITIQUE OF THE PROTO- INDO-EUROPEAN**



RAJENDRAN N.P.

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English,
B.J.M Govt. College Chavara, Kollam, Kerala

ABSTRACT

The construction of the history of a language can serve political purposes. As such, a Proto-Indo-European language is a colonial construct. It's co-born historical theories. Aryan Invasion Theory and Aryan Migration Theory bear witness to it. The evolution of Indian languages has not been caste or race-based. It was region- based. We cannot build the history of a vast country like India on such linguistic speculations. The western linguists go to the extent of creating a conjectural proto-Indo-European on the basis of cognates without any oral or written documents. That would make the dominant language families of India intrusive and invasive. Such an idea is contrary to the material history of the Indian sub-continent and Southeast Asia. Native scholars have from time to time resisted this colonial narrative. They have

highlighted the indigenous narration of 'out-of-India theory'. Similarities between Sanskrit and South Indian languages cannot be simply brushed away as interactional and assimilative. The indigenous critiques of this western linguistic theory have been largely neglected. The colonial discourse continues in one way or another in academic circles.

KEYWORDS

Proto-Indo-European, colonialism, Aryan Invasion/Migration Theory, Aryan and Dravidian languages, Language and politics

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

India is one country whose history and civilization have been grossly misinterpreted by a colonial and materialistic European bias. New evidences from linguistics, archeology and new scientific technology have enabled Indian scholars to question many of the colonial claims. Political ideologies and political correctness are behind this colonial hangover. Not just national history, the construction of the history of a language too can serve political purposes. The origin of the idea of the Indo-European languages was such a part of a colonial construction of Indian History. The recent archeological and genetic studies have only fanned the flames of the discussions on the origin of Indian languages.

The construct of the Indo-European is closely linked to the Aryan Invasion / Migration Theory (AIT/ AMT). When the European colonialist encountered Indian culture, it was a shattering experience for the white ego. They encountered the vast Vedic literature first and then the Indus Valley Civilization. The easiest way to overcome the cultural shock was to appropriate the intellectual achievements of the colonized people. The missionary more than the colonialist realized it. So the discovery of the similarities between the Sanskrit and European languages served a tool in hand for their purpose.

In order to understand the concept of the Indo-European and how it begun as a colonial enterprise rather than any scientific theory, we have to understand its co-born historical theories. Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT) and Aryan Migration Theory (AMT). Since the focus of this paper is on criticizing the concept of the Indo-European languages rather than that of AIT and / AMT, those theories will only be touched upon.

We will also conclusively examine how linguistics served historical purposes which, in turn, served political purposes. Linguistics which was a scientific pursuit of the phenomenon called language was utilized to score political points.

2. Inventing an Invasion.

The crude form of AIT says that a group of nomadic white people whose original homeland is attributed to as geographically divergent areas as many places in the Central Asia, Eastern Europe and even the Arctic, invaded and occupied northwest India and occupied rest of it replacing the indigenous people. Often, those who uphold this theory also claim the Indus valley civilization the oldest urban civilization in the country was overrun by these people.

AIT is more than 100 years old now. It was essentially a colonial construct. The concept can be seen grossly misused later when the German people in order to regain their lost national pride took up the Aryan identity in place of their Judeo-Christian one. But this racist theory

has been challenged by the native thinker's right from its beginning. Most of its premises are now being successfully challenged in the light of new scientific, archeological and literary evidences. Intriguingly, even the left-leaning historians with their professed anti-colonial stand are following the colonial lines out of political compulsions like having to counter the nationalist narrative of Indian history.

The word *Arya* applied to race or language does not make any sense scientifically. There has never been a racial, ethnic or language groups known as Aryans. The classical definition of the word *Arya* is based on civilizational norms.

Anthropologically and genetically, it has been shown that India has been populated for more than 50000 years and the present day divisions like Aryan and Dravidian have no scientific validity. The evolution of Indian languages has not been caste or race-based, either. It was region- based.

Talking about the Indo-European languages, Simon Pulleyen says that "the Indo-European family had probably its origin somewhere in the Russian steppes thousands of years ago." (54) Note how even a 2018- book dealing with PIE had to use words like 'probably' and 'somewhere'.

The latest findings on ancient Indian culture have demolished those theories. They can be summed up as follows.

a. The main centre of Harappan civilization is the newly discovered Sarasvati river. While the Indus River had only a few hundred important Harappan sites, the Sarasvati had thousands.

b. There has never any evidence for any significant invasion or destruction at ancient times. The Indus site was abandoned due to environmental causes.

c. The so-called Aryan traits like horse-riding, fire worship, cattle-raising have counterparts in ancient India. There cannot be any differences between the so-called Aryan culture and indigenous culture.

d. Many of the interpretations of Vedic literature have been since exposed. On the other hand, a critical study of the Vedic literature shows its indigenous base.

When the colonial construct of the invading people modelled on the legacy of the white colonialist who went on invading missions with white man's burden was challenged by indigenous scholars, the original theory was changed into a migratory theory. Thus AIT was replaced with AMT.

The native narrative also explains what is called ‘ Frawley’s Paradox’ in Indian history. We have got a vast literature known as Vedic literature in support of Vedic culture, but no corresponding archeology to support its existence .We have an astounding archeological presence in the form of Indus Valley Civilization, but without any literature to support it. With discovery of the lost Saraswati River and many archeological sites, the puzzle has been solved up to some extent. It has now been proven that Indus Valley Civilization was an urban extension of the Vedic culture and that urban settlements are not confined to the Indus Valley area alone but to the Southern peninsula of India.

The AIT was not originally based on archeological evidence at all. In the 19th century when it was proposed, very little archaeological work had been done. It was the product of linguistic speculation. The similarities between Sanskrit and the so-called Indo-European languages needed a common homeland from which a migration or invasion took place. But any linguistic migration as such has to take place before 6000 BC. But AIT puts the advent of the Aryans around 1500 BC.

The movement of people in large numbers at that time could have only taken place from east to west, since India could only have the presence of such large number of people in the area. Western areas from which they are supposed to have come are by and large still uninhabitable.

To build up the entire history of a country, which is as vast as a subcontinent, upon an unproven linguistic approach, was a hasty and unscientific act. The whole linguistic evidence was speculative- which was an attempt to reconstruct a proto or original language from extant language fragments and which located cultures on the basis of certain words that existed in different languages and which dated history by language changes alone. In most cases the ancient form of languages does not survive or they exist only partially. Without well-preserved Vedic texts, even such speculations would have been impossible. Without corroborative evidence, linguistic arguments cannot carry any historical weight.

The opinion of Jim G. Schaffer of Case Western Reserve University, USA quoted by Frawley is noteworthy:

“The shift by Harappan group and perhaps other Indus valley cultural mosaic groups is the only archeologically documented west to east movement of human population in south Asia before the first half of the first millennium BC.” (12)

Not only the Vedas but also the Buddha and the Jains called their philosophy *arya dharma* . AIT portrays Aryans as a racial stock and as having spoken one language, Sanskrit. But this language has been mainly spiritual and intellectual one. The idea of a monolithic cultural

group chauvinistically promoting ethnic and linguistic elements is the product of the 19 century colonial thinking.

In the light of new evidences demolishing the AIT, most of its exponents have changed their position. They have now started talking about an Aryan migration theory. The original racial, colonial and religious interests of the early Orientalists like William Jones, Max Muller and Macaulay continue to remain under new protective discourses. Romila Thapper is quoted as saying by Frawley:

“...it is generally agreed that the decline of Harappan urbanism was due to environmental stages of various kinds.....If invasion is discarded, then the mechanism of migration and occasional contacts come to sharper focus. The migration appears to have been of pastoral cattle headers who are prominent in the Avasta and Rigveda” (21).

The ferocious invader has now been turned into a pastoral migrant. But the AMT is weaker than AIT. With times and scholarship changing, the AMT model is now being turned into an interactive model.

Frawley continues:

“If such a migration was small and did not have any great impact on existing population or leaves any archeological record, as it is the case, it could not have changed the region at the level of language either, which is, to reiterate, the hardest and lowest part of culture to take” (22).

According to AIT and AMT, the languages of North India and South India are different. North Indian languages belong to the Indo- European languages and the South Indian languages are called Dravidian languages. Incidentally, both the Sanskrit and Tamil are ancient classical languages.

One of the pioneering missionaries who initiated this divisive policy is Bishop Robert Caldwell. He was a scholar of Tamil and Sanskrit, but not a scholar either of Prakrit or other south Indian languages. He tactfully compared Tamil with Sanskrit as if Sanskrit was a natural language like Tamil. Narayana Rao in his *Introduction to Dravidian Philology* criticizes this. He says Caldwell should have compared Tamil with Prakrit languages which were naturally evolved languages of North India. (74).

Creating a language for the so-called invading Aryans separate from that of the vanquished was a necessity. They chose Sanskrit as a language without confirming from where this language came into existence in the first place. Sanskrit was the oldest of the extant Indo-European languages and is certainly related to languages like Latin, Greek etc. Most of the North Indian languages are said to have been derived from Sanskrit. As for Tamil, it is

considered to be the oldest among the Dravidian languages. Linguistic distinctions should be made on linguistic basis. But in the case of Indo-European languages and Dravidian languages, the distinction is made on race not on region.

It was done by manipulating not only the political and social history of the country through AIT and AMT, the colonialist machinery also tampered with the cultural history of the country. The easiest way for all this was to analyze the linguistic plurality of India along racial lines rather than provincial lines. It served both the political and religious intention of the colonial people.

Those who support AIT and AMT raise the question of prevalence of IE languages in the north of India, while the Dravidian languages exist mainly in South India. But, the old mountains and rivers have Sanskrit names in north and south India. Also, many important geographical areas have Sanskrit names. The Rigvedic language was a synthetic language compiling and polishing different languages of the region. Vedic Sanskrit called *chandas* or meter was probably a poetic and spiritual language acceptable to the various peoples of the land who also found it a treasury language. Given the diversity of the Indian sub-continent in terms of population, culture and languages, it will be virtually impossible for comparatively less population force to replace the indigenous culture in India with an alien culture and language. Documented historical studies have shown that India is the only culture apart from China to successfully uphold her culture in spite of repeated invasions. India has either absorbed or withstood such invasions. Any primary diffusion of population will be from east to west. Ancient people like the Persians, Greeks and Celts have their homelands in regions to the east of their later homelands. It may be recalled that the very origin and spread of humanity was from east to west. They can move only with the help of a language/s, whatever may be the rudimentary forms of their language/s.

New studies on Indus valley writing system have shown that it has more affinity to the Brahmi script from which Devanagari and other Indian writing systems were derived. The earliest form of Brahmi script was reported from Tamil Nadu. Sanskrit is the most refined language in the world. To attribute it to the primitive barbarian goes against the grain. The latest studies in the field of genetics and natural history have thrown new light on the antiquity of Indian population and the strong connection with Southeast Asia going back to the Ice Age period. The southern basis for the Vedic culture is based upon two important points of natural history. The first is the geology of the Sarasvati River in the post Ice-Age period and the second is the dominance of South India and South East Asia as a source of human habitation and migration. The new historical assumption is that the post-Ice Age

Vedic culture was based upon the older proto-Vedic culture based in the south of India and South East Asia. The legend of Kumarikanda of South India engulfed by the sea is notable here. The southern connection and the migration from the southern region of India to the Himalayan mountains are clearly perceivable in the flood account given in *Matsya Purana*. Another important point is the movement of people out of Southeast Asia at the end of Ice-Age into Eurasia and the Far East Asia. That Asians especially the Indians were less mobile than the Europeans is another historical myth internalized by many Indian historians.

Human languages have existed for thousands of years. They are not simply the product of the last 5000 years. The movement of languages has to be traced along with the movement of populations. In ancient times, we can see an unparalleled oral culture being precisely kept in India. These movements of people and their burst into Central Asia and Eurasia are also attested by recent genetic studies. There is every possibility that the currently recognized language groups were formed and spoken even longer back in the Ice-Age period. For example, the numerals for one, five and eight are similar sounding in many so-called IE and Dravidian languages. How come that Tamil which was one of the ancient languages had to borrow such numerals from the IE languages? Sanskrit and European languages are shown as the evidence of common origin of these languages whereas similar -sounding and similar-meaning words in Sanskrit and other Indian languages are shown as borrowings. The western linguists go to the extent of creating a conjectural proto-Indo-European on the basis of these similarities without any oral or written documents. They also fail to account for many non-translatable words in Sanskrit which are documented right from the time of the *Rig Veda*. European languages can never even catch their meanings, let alone their connotations. Take the words *arya* and *dharma*. Sanskrit is a highly inflected language. So, word order is not all a prerequisite for the conveyance of meaning. Yet, Sanskrit and other Indian languages use a basic word order of subject-object- verb. David Shulman is forced to explain the left-branching syntax of both Tamil and Sanskrit in terms of assimilation:

“Despite what linguists sometimes claim, classical Sanskrit, for all its Indo-European origins, has largely assimilated this left-branching syntax (which we also see in the modern vernaculars of north India), along with various specific syntactical patterns prevalent in Dravidian.”(9)

Every linguistic borrowing requires a linguistic need, But, Shulman does not specify why such assimilations which affect the very basic structure of a language was necessitated. Semantic, structural and grammatical similarities between North Indian languages and South

Indian languages are explained in terms of borrowings and interactions while cognates among Sanskrit and European languages are shown as the evidence for common origin.

The movement of people out of India and Southeast Asia can provide the impetus for the spread of Indo-European languages north and west into Europe and Central Asia. A migration from populated to unpopulated areas and from cultivated areas to uncultivated area and cultured area to less cultured area is more probable, provided the migrated people are more spiritually, technologically and linguistically advanced. James Clackson, in his introductory study of Indo-European linguistics, says:

“The IE language family is extensive in time and space. The earliest attested IE language, Hittite, is attested nearly 4,000 years ago, written on clay tablets in cuneiform script in central Anatolia from the early second millennium BC. We have extensive textual remains, including native-speaker accounts of three more IE languages from 2,000 years ago: Ancient Greek, Latin and Sanskrit.”(2)

But these eminent scholars will not let us know why the earliest written form (Hittite) and the earliest most perfect spoken form of IE (Sanskrit) are found in the east and not in the west.

It is pertinent to note that India is the eastern focus of Indo-European languages. It is also the western focus of Indo Pacific family which covers the language of the Australian aborigines and the Papuans. The Astor Asiatic cuts across from India to the Pacific extending to Madagascar.

Indian languages of both the Sanskrit and Dravidian groups have considerable affinities and connections with Pacific languages. Those have not been adequately explored due to the obsession with connecting Proto-Indo-European to Europe and Central Asia. For example, the affinities between Sanskrit, Dravidian, Munda and South Asian languages. So is the case with the Pacific languages.

Within India the connections in terms of structure and vocabulary of the north and south Indian languages indicate much internal migration of people and diffusion of culture linking India not only to the Central Asia but more importantly to the Pacific region and to Southeast Asia. Dravidian languages also have connection with Altaic family of languages that includes Japanese and Korean.

The Aryan and the Dravidian invasion models would make the dominant language families of India intrusive and invasive. Such an idea is contrary to the material history of the Indian sub-continent and Southeast Asia. It is also against the fact that India had a stable population and had been a cultural community throughout the ancient period. The oldest language and also

the perfect form of the IEL being in India, the linguistic trace must be from the east to the west.

The Indo-European languages and the Dravidian languages are probably offshoots of such an older Indo-Pacific group of languages. Ancient South India was a proto-Vedic culture. Apart from these influences, nature and climate changes have also played a role in the evolution of Indian languages. The Vedic culture had, by extension, relationship with countries from Persia to Ireland in terms of ritualistic practices, sacred plants, and many other things. But similar concepts exist between North and South India and between many South East Asian countries also. Actually South East Asia may prove more important as a source for human population than the western part of India and Central Asia. Many of the earliest agricultural sites had been in Southeast Asia in the Ice age period. The Indian view of time itself is cyclic in the sense that civilizations spring up, sustain themselves and die out or change into better or worse ones.

Modern linguists think that you can reconstruct an ancient language with the help of the words of existing languages. But words are created and moulded in accordance with geography, culture, religions and customs and not in a cultural vacuum. The colonial, neocolonial and Marxist discourses on a country of plurality like India consider Indian sub-continent just as a linguistic and cultural sponge just absorbing people, cultures and languages.

These colonial discourses have been challenged by the native scholars right from the beginning, though they were sidelined in the main stream academic arena. Some of the indigenous and native scholars include Swamy Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Dayananda Saraswati. Even the well-fortified argument, despite accepting the colonial narrative of the period, by C.R. Narayana Rao, a prominent linguist, in response to Bishop Caldwell's theory of Dravidian languages was ignored.

Take the case of Sri Aurobindo who was a seer poet, mystic and critic who knew many languages inside out including Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek and, who, on having learnt Tamil, observes:

“And it was through this Dravidian language that I came first to perceive what seems to me now the true law, origins and, as it were, the embryology of the Aryan tongues. I was unable to pursue my examination far enough to establish any definite conclusion, but it certainly seems to me that the original connection between the Dravidian and Aryan tongues was far closer and more extensive than is usually supposed and the possibility

suggests itself that they may even have been two divergent families derived from one lost primitive tongue.”(38)

In Kerala, Chattampi Swamikal, a noted scholar with a deep knowledge of Sanskrit and Tamil wrote his book *Adhibhasha* in about 1910 in which he establishes, quoting the Sidha tradition of South India, that the first human beings originated in the now sunken Kumarikanda from where they migrated to South India and that, from South India, they gradually moved to North India and then they went out of India into the west. When they migrated to North India from the South, their language evolved into Prakrit languages from which Sanskrit was made as a programmed and purified language, which was, in turn, used for spiritual, literacy and linguistic purposes. In the South, the original language, which he calls moola *dravida*, later became Tamil.

Similarities between Sanskrit and South Indian languages cannot be simply brushed away as interactional. Neither can an impartial and studious mind reject the native narratives about Indian languages outright. Nicholas Kanakanas calls the racially prejudiced linguistic attitude of those upholding AIT and AMT “a most astonishing assertion of linguistic arrogance.” (xvii).

3. Sacred philology versus political philology.

A careful study of the Indo-European languages shows that it is a colonial construct to appropriate historically advanced cultures to sustain the western colonialism. Evangelical politics too has played a role in it.

The linguists who tried to reconstruct the Proto-Indo-European using words from the existing words especially with the help of Sanskrit the oldest among them are in the wrong direction. The majority of such words are presented with asterisks which are used in linguistics and grammar to show expressions which are incorrect or of doubtful nature. The Belgian Indologist Dr. Koneraad Elst satirically titles his minor writings on AIT ‘Asterisk in Bharopiyasthan’. He says ‘‘ The *Urheimat* where the adventures of Asterisk took place is still *incognita* (x)

So, to build linguistic theories on a spurious reconstruction of a non-existent language and to use these theories to push equally doubtful historical theories which are intended to serve culturally and politically vested interests, is not scholarly work. The nativist critiques of the linguistic theory based on western scholars’ concept of the Proto- Indo-European have been largely neglected. Because of the political patronage, academic obstinacy and ideological compulsions, the colonial discourse continues in one way or another in academic circles.

With the latest developments in natural history, linguistics and archeology, both AIT and AMT have been reduced to mere political stands and are not recognized as any serious historical studies. Looking for a Proto- Indian European language outside of India has been proved to be futile. So the shift has to be towards India and South East Asia where the oldest forms of civilizations and languages have flourished. It is high time to look for the native concepts about Indian languages before the colonialist and the missionary came. To derive linguistic categorizations like Aryan and Dravidian based on supposed racial basis in India where a language is spoken irrespective of race and caste in a given area, is unscientific. The scientific evidences have conclusively shown that Indian people and their languages have been in existence for more years than the colonialist historical constructs claim. In order to solve the linguistic problems in India, we have to look at the natural history, languages culture and peoples together and look at them as an interconnection.

It is more natural to look at India as a natural geographical cultural, linguistic and population zone. It is not a cultural and linguistic barren land eternally condemned to absorbing only extraneous elements, as the colonialist would have us believe .This is all the more important when the old colonial discourses have taken new twists in European and American academia. In a nut shell, the indigenists and those western scholars who support the indigenous stand say we have to look for a Proto-European language in India, not outside of it. In recent times, many western scholars like Dr. George Feuerstein, David Frawely, E. Bryant, Nicholas Kazanas and Koneraad Elst too have joined the fray supporting the indigenous view. The linguistic issues have involved into an ideological fight on many accounts. It is, to borrow a phrase from Rajiv Malhotra, a noted Indian intellectual, a fight between sacred philology and political philology.(362)

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