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Vedic "Aryans" and the Origins of Civilization

A literary and scientific perspective

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and
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This criticism no longer applies to modern linguistics. Nevertheless, early theories continue to dominate the study of ancient India; many Western Indologists and their Indian followers treat discredited nineteenth-century theories as gospel and are largely oblivious to the findings of more recent research in fields such as linguistics and the history of science. For this reason, their work must be subjected to systematic and rigorous analysis.

Indian scholars, for the most part, have failed to recognize the problem.

> We have to recognise in fact, noted Aurobindo, that European scholarship in its dealing with the Veda has derived an excessive prestige [in India] from its association in the popular mind with the march of European Science. The truth is that there is an enormous gulf between the patient, scrupulous and exact physical sciences and these other brilliant, but immature branches of learning upon which Vedic scholarship relies. . . . [T]hese [latter] are compelled to build upon scanty data large and sweeping theories and supply the deficiency . . . by an excess of conjecture and hypothesis (1971 [1914–20]: 28).

The same is true of other fields. These are based on too much theory and not enough hard evidence. But many Indian scholars of the post-colonial period have lacked training in both science and tradition, either of which would have allowed them to take a fresh and critical look at prevailing theories. Considering the circumstances—a generation was just emerging from the effects of colonialism—these weaknesses were inevitable. Indian scholars were in no position to subject *any* theory to rigorous examination. They still looked to the West for leadership. Western scholars who became famous in India, such as Müller, were adulated almost as *gurus*; they ceased to be questioned, even after the West had forgotten them. And with the sponsorship of political leaders sharing the same intellectual weaknesses, it was inevitable that revising ancient history to fit the currently fashionable political theory would become requisite. The result was again as Aurobindo described it:

> [That] Indian scholars have not been able to form themselves into a great & independent school of learning, is due to two causes, the miserable scantiness of the mastery in Sanscrit provided by our Universities, crippling to all but born scholars, and our lack of sturdy independence which makes us overready to defer to European authority. These however are difficulties easily surmountable (1991: 11).

Fortunately, these difficulties are being overcome. There is now a flourishing school of Indian historiography based on formidable linguistic and literary skills.

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Political history of the "Aryan" invasion

THEORY AND POLITICS

It is now more than a century since the famous Aryan-invasion theory of India made its way into history books. A "theory must not contradict empirical facts" said Albert Einstein. But the invasion theory, though never subjected to empirical tests, has assumed the status of historical fact—a state of affairs that owes more to politics than to scholarship. This chapter will examine several aspects of the Aryan-invasion theory, including the roles played by German nationalism and British colonialism. Of particular importance are the peculiar ramifications of the Franco-Prussian War and German unification, which led Friedrich Max Müller to change what had been a racial theory into a linguistic one.

Background

Müller formulated the scenario and chronology that have remained central to the standard version of ancient Indian history. As a consequence of recent findings in archaeology, astronomy, and literature—most recently in the mathematics of ancient India and the Near East—his century-year old model no longer seems tenable. We must reconsider the evidence for this theory. We must also consider, however, the irrational sources—racial theories, political and personal motives, prevailing social conditions—from which it

sprang. By lifting the veil of scholarly jargon that protects it, revealing the personal and cultural factors that gave shape to it, we can study ancient history more effectively and place Indian history on a firmer scholarly (and scientific) foundation.

The "Aryan" invasion: Theory and evidence

The history books used in Indian schools today invariably begin with a description of the Indus Valley civilization, the discovery of two major sites, Harappa and Mohenjodaro, and a brief description of what has been found there. These sites show evidence of a remarkably advanced civilization with carefully planned cities, magnificent public buildings, a drainage system, and so on. But this civilization went into decline and finally disappeared by 1500 B.C.E. The main cause was an invasion by nomadic tribes from central Asia, the Aryans. These invaders are said to have entered India through passes in the northwest, overcome the inhabitants of the Indus Valley, and established themselves over much of northern India. There, they composed their literature, the most important text of which is the *Ṛg Veda*. The recorded history of India begins in earnest, it is said, with Aryan records of their invasion.

This scenario is supposedly supported by linguistic evidence: the fact that people in northern and southern India speak languages from different families. The former speak Aryan languages; the latter speak Dravidian ones. Inhabitants of the Indus Valley civilization (usually considered synonymous with Harappa and Mohenjodaro) were supposedly Dravidians whose civilization was destroyed by the invading Aryans. The latter were light-skinned, the former dark-skinned. For evidence, the *Ṛg Veda* is consulted. At any rate, the invasion is said to have taken place around 1500. The composition of the Vedas is said to have begun between 1200 and 1000.

It would be natural to conclude that this theory was a careful reconstruction based on archaeology and historical linguistics. Yet this was not the case. Its origin was in eighteenth-century Europe and the political, racial, religious, and nationalistic forces that were then part of the scene (Poliakov 1974 [1971]). The two most influential forces that went into creating this theory were European racism, especially anti-Semitism, and German nationalism. The theory was written into Indian history books by British colonial authorities, but it was essentially a European and not a British creation. Comparative linguistics, let alone archaeology, did not even exist at the time. In fact, comparative linguistics is largely a *result* of the European discovery of Sanskrit. It can hardly be claimed, therefore, that this theory is the result of archaeology and the comparative study of languages.

Although the theory had its origins in the eighteenth-century, it received its full embellishment only in the nineteenth. It seemed to strike no one as

odd—at least at the time—that an invasion by light-skinned people of a land inhabited by dark-skinned people happened to be an exact description of contemporary European colonialism in Asia and Africa; a substitution of "European" for "Aryan" and "Asian" or "African" for "Dravidian" would have presented a description of numerous European colonial campaigns in Asia or Africa. To understand this theory, therefore, we must look at the political and other forces that gave rise to it. But first, it will be useful to take a brief look at what Indus archaeology does or does not have to say about an Aryan invasion.

The first point to note is that early archaeologists, such as John Marshall and Mortimer Wheeler, interpreted the Indus sites in conformity with the Aryan-invasion theory, which by then had already become well established. Once formulated, the invasion theory was treated as an established fact, and all subsequent findings were derived from it. These interpretations, in turn, were later offered as proof of the theory. A prime example is the interpretation of ruins at Harappa and Mohenjodaro as results of an invasion; later, the interpretation became *proof* of an invasion. This is tautological, or circular, reasoning: the theory is eventually put forth as its own proof. S. R. Rao, an archaeologist, had this to say about Wheeler's interpretation of the Harappan ruins:

> [A]s time passed, a restudy of the stratigraphy of Wheeler's excavation of Harappa revealed that there was a time gap between the mature Harappan (Cemetery R 37) and later "Cemetery H" cultures. Wheeler had treated the latter as invaders and the former as the invaded. But stratigraphy clearly indicated that the so-called "invaded" were not present when the so-called "invaders" came. Fresh excavation in Mohenjodaro by G. F. Dales and a study of the artefacts . . . confirmed that the "massacre" [due to the invasion] was a myth (1993: v–vi).

Belief in an Aryan invasion and an Aryan-Dravidian conflict was by then so strong that Wheeler, Marshall, Stuart Piggott, and many others compounded an archaeological misinterpretation with cultural ones. They concluded that the many finished stone blocks and terra-cotta pieces found at the ruins were objects venerated by a cult of phallus-worshipping Dravidian Śaivites.

> "The so-called stone objects considered as phalluses by Marshall and Piggot," writes Rao, "are truncated conical stone weights similar to those found at the Harappan sites in Gujarat" (1993: vi).

In fact, the weight standards evolved by the Harappans remained in use there for thousands of years after the disappearance of Harappan civilization

itself. Early investigators also naively believed that the prevalence of Śiva worship (of which there was little evidence) necessarily meant that the people were Dravidian speakers of southern India. Yet the main sacred sites of Śaivism are in the north, in the Himalayas, and, above all, on the Gaṅgā River, which was the site of post-Harappan, not Harappan civilization. In their eagerness to believe what they wanted to believe, these men overlooked evidence that the Harappans were part of an earlier civilization—or more precisely, as this book will demonstrate, the post-Vedic period of ancient Indian civilization. Rao is explicit on this point:

> The negative evidence in the form of absence of the horse and rice in Indus Civilization which was taken as evidence of its Dravidian origin is no more tenable in view of the occurrence of horse bones and rice at Lothal, Kalibangan, Surkotada and Ropar in India and Mohenjo-daro in Pakistan. On the other hand, there is enough positive evidence in support of the religious rites of the Harappans being similar to those of the Vedic Aryans. Their religious motifs, deities and sacrificial altars bespeak of Aryan faith.
>
> One of the major contributions made by the Harappans is *yoga* which the Vedic Aryans also practiced. Several terracotta figures of Harappa are depicted in yogic *āsanas* . . . and what is quite impressive is that the human figures with horns which suggest divinity are seated in yogic postures (1993: vii; emphasis in original).

The human figure with horns, representing Paśupati, seems to have been a common deity of pre-Christian Europe as well. A huge silver cup bearing that figure, from around 500 B.C.E., has been found as far west as Denmark, the so-called Gundestrup Cauldron (Taylor 1992). Shrikant Talageri (1993) has pointed out, there is now persuasive evidence from diverse sources pointing to India as the original home of Indo-European speakers who migrated to the west and northwest in prehistoric times. This is the exact reverse of the Aryan-invasion theory.

But there are still more fundamental contradictions. How are we to reconcile the vast differences between what this theory tells us about the invaders and their actual achievements? The American scholar Vyaas Houston wondered about the resulting paradox and, in particular, about the *Ṛg Veda* and its language:

> Where did it come from?—a language infinitely more sophisticated than any of our modern tongues. How could language have been so much more refined in ancient times, especially among a people, the Vedic Aryans, whom scholars tell us were nomadic barbarians from the north? The discrepancy between the language and what has been . . . offered as its origin is so great that either we [are] . . . thoroughly at a loss, or have tended at times to resort to supernatural explanations. The obvious truth is that there must have been an equally refined and advanced civilization (1991: 11).

The whole theory is riddled with paradoxes. Most glaring is what David Frawley refers to as the paradox of "a literature without history and a history without a literature" (chapter 2).

SCHOLARSHIP AND POLITICS

It would be an oversimplification to say that the Germans created the Aryan-invasion theory and the British used it, but not by much. From its very beginning, two major political forces affected the theory's tortuous course profoundly: German nationalism and British colonialism. These are virtually inseparable from the invasion theory. In connection with it, nevertheless, textbooks mention neither German nationalism nor British colonialism.

Müller's contribution

Müller is still generally regarded as the greatest Indologist of his generation and a peerless Sanskrit scholar. While he was really neither, circumstances favored him, and he proved himself highly adaptable. He is also widely regarded as a great lover of India and its culture. His contribution to the study of Indian literature and religion seems monumental. Nevertheless, his translation of the *Ṛg Veda* no longer commands the same authority that it did a hundred years ago, at least among those prepared to read the original.[1] He was mistaken about history and chronology, moreover, and scientific ineptitude led him to formulate interpretations that had no foundation. Yet the immense prestige that his name still commands, combined with prevalent ignorance of Sanskrit and the Vedas on the part of many Indian historians and Indologists, have given his readings and interpretations an authority bordering on infallibility.

More than anyone, Müller is responsible for the Aryan-invasion theory and an extremely late Vedic chronology that assigns the *Ṛg Veda* to 1200 B.C.E. Under pressure from critics, he later disowned his chronology: "Whether the Vedic hymns were composed [in] 1000, or 1500, or 2000, or 3000 years B.C., no power on earth will ever determine" (Müller 1891: 91). In formulating his Vedic chronology, Müller was strongly influenced by a current Christian belief that the creation of the world had taken place at 9:00 A.M. on 23 October 4004 B.C.E.

Assuming the date of 4004 for the creation of the world, as Müller did, leads to 2448 for the biblical Flood. If another thousand years is allowed for the waters to subside and for the soil to get dry enough for the Aryans to begin their invasion of India, we are left at around 1400. Adding another two hundred years before they could begin composing the *Rg Veda* brings us right to Müller's date of 1200. As I observe in chapter 3, he used a ghost story from Somadeva's *Kathāsaritasāgara* to support this date.

Müller was both a German romantic and, in effect, a Protestant missionary. Though never a missionary in the literal sense, he infused his work with the missionary spirit. In 1868, writing to the Duke of Argyle, Under-Secretary of State for India, Müller exhorted: "[T]he ancient religion of India is doomed—and if Christianity does not step in, whose fault will it be?" (1902, 1: 378).

Because the image of Müller looms large in the current version of ancient Indian history, it is worth taking a close look at the circumstances that led to his pre-eminent position in Indology. In fact, it is possible to get a fairly complete picture of the progress of the Aryan-invasion theory by following his life and career.

Müller and many of his colleagues were devout Christians who believed that the noble end of spreading their faith was justified. Actions that seem biased or even unacceptable to later generations were, from their point of view, admirable efforts to advance worthwhile causes such as religion and patriotism. They were not inclined to take positions that went against their own scriptures. Müller's belief in biblical chronology is well attested. Fellow scholar Theodore Goldstücker noted explicitly that Müller's Vedic chronology was constructed so that the invasion would have come after the biblical Flood (see Müller 1849-73, 4). Added to this was the notion of race.

The idea of race—and its offshoot, "race science"—interested nineteenth-century Europeans to a degree that is incomprehensible today. Just as many educated Indians today find the notion of caste bewildering, educated Europeans today are likely to find the belief in "race science" baffling. It was assumed that racial differences in behavior and mental ability could be demonstrated scientifically. A bigoted Brahmin in India or a slaveholder in America might have appealed to scripture to justify their attitudes; an intellectual in nineteenth-century Europe sought support from science. Because many were without any scientific background, they went about creating a "race science." This justified their own preconceptions.

The home of this pseudo-science was Germany, but it was popular also among French savants such as Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau. They gave currency to the concept of an Aryan race. It was Müller's friend, Paul Regnaud, who popularized the word "Aryan" in France. In this milieu, Sanskrit studies became highly popular, especially in Germany, which was the home of Indology for over a century. What conditions in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe led to this Aryan theory and eventually propelled Müller to his position of pre-eminence?

By the late eighteenth century, the British found themselves with increased administrative responsibilities in India. These required them to become better acquainted with Indian history, literature, law, and tradition. This naturally led them to study Sanskrit. Among the first to do so was William Jones who began his study of Sanskrit in 1784 with the help of Radhakanta Sarman. Jones soon noticed remarkable similarities between Sanskrit and European languages such as Greek and Latin. He became a great admirer of Sanskrit, as the following passage makes clear:

> The *Sanscrit* language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the *Greek*, more copious than the *Latin* and more exquisitely refined than either (Jones 1806: 420; emphasis in original).

Jones went on to establish the Royal Asiatic Society and is rightly regarded today as the founder of Indology. He was soon followed by his assistant, Henry Colebrooke.

But these were not the first modern Europeans to note similarities between Sanskrit and European languages. That honor probably belongs to Filippo Sassetti, a Florentine merchant. In 1587, after a five-year stay in Goa, he asserted that there was a definite connection between Sanskrit and European languages. Though England held the key to India, interestingly, Europe, especially Germany, produced most Indological and Sanskrit scholarship. Whereas British interests were primarily commercial, the German attachment to India was emotional and romantic. This infatuation with Indian culture and Sanskrit also contributed to German nationalism. To understand this, we need next to take a look at the roots of German interest in India.

The Germans were weak and divided. The map of Europe was dotted with German dukedoms and principalities. French and Austrian governments marched their armies through them with scant regard for the people or their rulers. Germans believed that they had been the helpless victims of great power rivalries, which was not wholly unjustified in view of the fact that their land had been ravaged in a series of battles from the Thirty Years War to the Napoleonic conquests. This had led to a sense of not being masters of their own destiny and to a feeling that their petty rulers were nothing but pawns in the imperial games of neighboring powers—that is, France and Austria. In this environment of impotence and alienation, not surprisingly, German intellectuals sought solace in an exotic ancient land and its culture. Some leading German intellectuals were students of Indian literature and philosophy. Thinkers such as Georg Hegel, Wilhelm von Humboldt,

Friedrich von Schlegel, Wilhelm von Schlegel, and Arthur Schopenhauer became infatuated with India and its heritage.

All of this seemed amusing at first to the sober British. It soon gave rise to alarm, though, as Prussia began to emerge as a major European power. The rise of Prussia upset the colonial balance of power: Britain now had to contend with a competing empire. Even though the German Empire did not exist formally until 1871, the signs were already there. As always, Britain's foremost concern was India. When the petty German states finally united under the Prussian banner in 1871, the feeling was widespread among the British Indian authorities that German study of India and Sanskrit had influenced the process.

For the British, still reeling from the revolt of 1857, the idea that the divided people of India, too, might unite was a recurring nightmare. Even before the revolt, it was widely recognized that British rule could never last if the people of India were to unite under any sort of cause. Just as the French sought to secure themselves by keeping the German people divided, the British saw a divided India as requisite for the survival of their Indian empire. They knew that the Brahmins were the only people who, as a group, commanded the respect of all communities across the length and breadth of India; most other castes, such as the Marāṭhas, the Rājpūts, and the Reddis, were regional. On this score, British missionaries found common cause with the government. They were soon joined by other European missionaries studying Sanskrit. Many Indologists at the time had ecclesiastical backgrounds. The strong anti-Brahmin bias that dominates much of nineteenth-century writing on India and continues even today must be attributed at least in part to political and missionary interests. Though the Brahmins were hardly free from blame, they were hardly as evil as British authorities and missionaries said they were. In some ways, they were conservative and even reactionary, like the Japanese *samurai*. Paradoxically, however, they also took the lead in promoting the social, educational, and cultural reforms of the Indian Renaissance. In any case, the Brahmins were largely responsible for the preservation of the Vedas and other ancient works. Thanks to them, in fact, we are now in a position to reconstruct the history of ancient India.

Unlike the German interest in India and Sanskrit studies, which was emotional, the British was entirely practical. Even the proselytizing activities of European missionaries, which the British authorities actively encouraged before 1857, had a colonial motive. Consider one example. Thomas Macaulay believed that the spread of Christianity would facilitate the administration of India. Though not himself a missionary, he came from a deeply religious family. His father was a Presbyterian minister and his mother a Quaker. Being involved in education, he was instrumental in establishing a network of modern English schools in India. One of its goals was the conversion of Hindus to Christianity. Indians took readily to English education.

Macaulay confused this intellectual curiosity for religious enthusiasm. In a letter to his father in 1836, he enthusiastically wrote:

> Our English schools are flourishing wonderfully. . . . The effect of this education on the Hindoos is prodigious. . . . It is my firm belief that, if our plans of education are followed up, there will not be a single idolater among the respectable classes in Bengal thirty years hence. And this will be effected without any efforts to proselytize; without the smallest interference with religious liberty; merely by the natural operation of knowledge and reflection. I heartily rejoice in the prospect (Macaulay 1876, 1: 398–99).

The interesting point here is Macaulay's belief that "knowledge and reflection" on the part of the Hindus, especially the Brahmins, would cause them to give up their age-old beliefs in favor of Christianity. In effect, his plan was to turn the Brahmins' strength against them by using their commitment to scholarship to uproot their own tradition. To this end, he wanted someone to interpret Indian scriptures so that the newly educated Indian elite could see for itself the difference between these scriptures and the Bible, choosing the latter. Macaulay persisted in his search for nearly fifteen years. He first approached Horace Wilson, the Boden professor of Sanskrit at Oxford. It was natural that Macaulay should have turned to Wilson, who was the foremost Sanskritist in England. Wilson knew India well, however, and wanted no part of it. Having spent several years there collaborating with his Brahmin friends on translations of the *Ṛg Veda* and the Purāṇas, he must have sensed the futility of Macaulay's scheme. Also, Wilson had already translated a good part of the *Ṛg Veda* and did not want to go through it again, especially in England, where he had no Indian help. Moreover, he was getting older. Wilson recommended a devoutly Protestant and exceptionally capable Vedic scholar from Germany: Müller, who had already determined to bring out a critical edition of the *Ṛg Veda* with the commentary of Sāyaṇa but was having difficulty raising the necessary funds. In December of 1854, the Prussian ambassador, Baron von Bunsen, brought Müller to see Macaulay.

Despite Macaulay's great influence with the East India Company, it was not until 1854—nearly fifteen years after his return from India—that he was able to finance his plan properly. Müller was told that the Company would be prepared to fund him to the tune of one lākh of rupees—about £10,000, then an enormous sum—to translate the *Ṛg Veda* in a way that would destroy the belief of newly English educated Hindus in their ancient scripture. For an impoverished foreign scholar who had already been working on the *Ṛg Veda* for several years, this was a godsend. Though an ardent German nationalist, Müller agreed for the sake of Christianity to work for the

Company, which for all practical purposes meant the British government of India. This was the origin of his great enterprise: *The Sacred Books of the East*. That project would propel the relatively obscure scholar to the position of being regarded as the greatest Western Sanskritist of the century, if not of all time. It is interesting to note that, during more than fifty years devoted to the study of India, he *never once* visited the country.

In judging Müller and other scholars of his era, we must be careful to separate motives from contributions. His motives are particularly hard to fathom, because he seems to have concealed his true intentions and shifted his position to suit circumstances. This situation stemmed, no doubt, partly from his delicate position as a German nationalist living and working in England. He was clearly obsessed with Sanskrit and the *Rg Veda*. Before his fateful meeting with Macaulay, he had received only paltry sums for his work. The full amount promised or recommended by Macaulay never fully materialized and he had to apply repeatedly for funds. It was only in March of 1856 that the East India Company agreed to grant a sum that "shall not exceed £3000." A year later, after the revolt of 1857, the Company was no more. Müller had to start all over again. He always had to walk a fine line, making sure that his patrons were kept happy. His position called for patience, persuasion, and diplomatic skills of a high order. In these circumstances, it is a miracle that he was able to achieve as much as he actually did. Yet there can be no question that he saw his scholarly work as part of a mission to convert India to Christianity. When writing to his wife in 1866 about his translation of the *Rg Veda*, he observed:

> [T]his edition of mine and the translation of the *Veda* will hereafter tell to a great extent . . . the fate of India, and on the growth of millions of souls in that country. It is the root of their religion, and to show them what the root is, is, I feel sure, the only way of uprooting all that has sprung from it during the last 3,000 years (Müller 1902, 1: 346).

This and his letter to the Duke of Argyle (cited earlier) are the clearest statements of his motives. Though given to shifting positions, there can be little doubt that he was sincere in his desire to uproot Indian tradition.[2] He might have adopted this as a pose with his sponsors but would hardly do so in a letter to his own wife. So Macaulay (or Wilson) had apparently chosen his man well.

Like Richard Burton (and Lawrence of Arabia in the next century), Müller was an agent of the British government. He was paid to advance its colonial interests. This in no way diminishes his contribution. It does, however, place a responsibility on students to recognize his circumstances and be aware at all times of the biases and political factors that shaped his interpretations of the Vedas and other Indian works. Many modern historians

have failed to do so. They have also failed to recognize Müller's ignorance of science. These two crucial points about nineteenth-century scholars—strong religious beliefs and a poor to non-existent scientific background—should always be kept in mind when studying their work. As I point out in chapter 3, these factors combined often led them to erroneous conclusions about astronomy and mathematics. Müller's case was further complicated by his pressing need for sponsors in England and his emotional involvement with German nationalism.

As much as anyone else, Müller was responsible for giving the word "Aryan" a racial meaning. Yet nothing resembling a racial definition is in the original Sanskrit. Though he shifted his position later, adopting a linguistic model, there is ample evidence that he, like many others of his time, had used the word in a racial sense (Poliakov 1974 [1971]). Unlike most German romantics and nationalists, Müller was fully aware that *in Sanskrit,* "ārya" *does not refer to any race*. In 1861, nevertheless, he, gave a series of lectures under the title "Science of Language" in which he made extensive use of Vedic hymns to show that the Sanskrit word "*ārya*" (English: "Aryan") meant a race of people (Müller 1861, see also 1864). He was doubtless responding to the European preoccupations of the moment, especially in Germany. W. Schlegel, on the other hand, no less a romantic or nationalist, was never guilty of this practice; he always used the word in the sense of "honorable," which is not far removed from the original. By misusing the word, Müller conferred a sort of legitimacy on the racial usage even though he knew, as a scholar, that there was no support for it in the Vedas.

Then, in 1872, Müller changed his stand quite unexpectedly. Speaking at the University of Strasbourg in German-occupied France, he stated his new doctrine: the word "*ārya*" could refer only to a family of languages that included Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, Avestan, and others; it could never apply to a race (Müller 1872). Not coincidentally, 1871 was also the year of German unification following Prussia's victory over France in the Franco-Prussian War. For a quarter of a century, he had used the word in a racial sense; for the next thirty years, he would insist that the word could refer only to a language family or culture. But his shift had no impact. Unable to undo what he himself had done, Müller became uncharacteristically adamant.

> "I have declared again and again," he said in 1888, "that if I say Aryas, I mean neither blood nor bones, nor hair nor skull; I mean simply those who speak an Aryan language. . . . To me an ethnologist who speaks of Aryan race, Aryan blood, Aryan eyes and hair, is as great a sinner as a linguist who speaks of a dolichocephalic dictionary or of brachycephalic grammar" (Müller 1888: 120).

Such excessive vehemence in a man normally so moderate and com-

posed is somewhat surprising. What lay behind this abrupt and complete *volte face*? Was he, at nearly fifty in 1872, suddenly convinced of the error of his ways? Possibly. But politics and concerns about his own future in England must have had something to do with it. Before 1871, France had been England's major rival as a colonial power. But its crushing defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, followed by German unification, changed the map of Europe. Germany now became the most populous and powerful country in western Europe. Müller, though a German by birth, was established comfortably in England by then, in the midst of preparing and editing *The Sacred Books of the East*. His sponsor, after all, was the British government of India. At that time, he had no great reputation in Germany; there, he was considered a romantic rather than a scientific philologist and a throwback to an earlier age. It was probably impractical for him to consider returning to his homeland. Personally, the stakes were enormous. German unification was followed by an outburst of British patriotism in England and the hapless Müller found himself having to walk a political tightrope. As already noted, ideas about an Aryan race and culture were considered by the British to have played a significant part in German nationalism and to be a potential threat to the British position in India. The last thing Müller could afford was to be seen advancing a German ideology in England. Some have attributed his sudden shift to a sense of guilt for the barbaric behavior of his fellow Germans during their occupation of France, where he had friends. This is possible. Müller was basically a soft-hearted and decent man. But that alone cannot explain his dramatic switch. It speaks volumes for the man's courage that he walked into the lion's den, so to speak—a university in Prussian-occupied France—to denounce the German doctrine about an Aryan race. Whatever his reasons, he was a staunch opponent of the Aryan-race theory for the next thirty years.[3]

We must take into account the following two basic facts (Poliakov 1974 [1971]): first, the Aryan-invasion theory of India was preceded by an Aryan-invasion theory of Europe which was developed by intellectuals who wanted to "free" themselves from Christianity's Jewish roots. Second, German nationalism, resulting in the emergence of the German Empire under the guidance of Otto von Bismarck, was probably the principal force that impelled Müller to turn his originally racial theory into a linguistic one.

This abrupt shift from race to language meant that Müller's new theory of an Aryan migration—with language replacing race—had to be formulated in extreme haste. The original Aryan ancestors were placed in Sogdiana in the Trans-Oxus region north of Kashmir. Apparently, one branch migrated southeast and went on to become the Europeans; a second branch migrated southeast into Iran, Afghanistan, and India to become the Indo-Iranians (even though both Iran and Afghanistan actually lie to the southwest of Sogdiana, not to the southeast). As support, Müller claimed that the original

Aryans were landlocked and immobile and therefore had neither a notion of the sea nor any word in their language for "fish" (even though he failed to note that several species of fish are found in Sogdiana).

In the rush to dissociate himself from the Aryan-race theory and German nationalism, Müller had succeeded in creating a contradiction: the Aryans of central Asia were so immobile that they were ignorant of the ocean just a few hundred miles away and of fish even closer. Nevertheless, they were so fleet of foot (or horse) that they managed to spread themselves over a vast stretch from the east coast of India to Ireland. Nothing but extreme haste can account for such a weak theory from a scholar of Müller's eminence.

The Aryan-invasion scenario—first racial but later linguistic—was the result of a complex interaction of forces; among these, scholarship was probably the least important. In situations of this kind, evidence and logic give way inevitably to political needs and rationalizing rhetoric. Müller was caught in an imperial game. He could do little but produce what the circumstances would allow. On the whole, history has treated him extremely well. Judged by the standards of his age, he was a giant: a great scholar and a generous, even noble, man. But he made too many compromises—first with German nationalists and their racial theories; later with Macaulay and the British.

The Western contribution and the current Indian scene

On balance, however, it must be acknowledged that India owes an enormous debt of gratitude to the labors of nineteenth-century Western scholars. Müller, as much as anyone, is responsible for the resurgent interest in the Vedas in India. Westerners brought to India new ways of looking at age-old works and traditions. When every allowance is made for prejudices of the age, it must be recognized that Indian society needed an external force to stir its moribund spirit. Even Aurobindo conceded as much:

> "It was the curiosity of a foreign culture," he wrote, "that broke after many centuries the seal of final authoritativeness which Sayana had fixed on the ritualistic interpretation of the Veda. The ancient Scripture was delivered over to a scholarship laborious, bold in speculation, ingenious in its flights of fancy, conscientious according to its own lights, but ill-fitted to understand the method of the old mystic poets" (1971 [1914–20]: 22).

And Indologist M. C. Joshi wrote:

> [B]ut what we want to say is that European writings on Indological sub-

> jects and the western thought of the British Period . . . did make an impact on [the] Indian mind in more than one way. Such intellectual developments gave Indians a vision different from the traditional one and enabled them to assess and compare ideas on the growth of religion and philosophy through the ages in the east and west. It has to be admitted that the western scholarship and knowledge in the early part of the colonial rule was certainly more advanced in relation to modernism than those of Indian traditionalists. . . . In fact, India of today owes a lot to the intellectual growth of the nineteenth century (1980: viii).

This Western impulse was precisely what India needed at the time. With it came advances in science and education and the recovery of a long-lost critical spirit. Archaeology, a field in which some of the most exciting work is now being done in India, is a gift from the West. Just as Indo-European studies and modern linguistics would not exist without the Indian contribution, many outstanding Indian achievements, including such seminal contributions as Talageri's possible untangling of the Indo-European puzzle, owe their origins to the European impulse. At least some of the credit for India's renaissance in historical research should go to the labors of these earlier scholars.

A critical re-examination of the foundations of ancient Indian history is now taking place both in India and the West. Understandably, the problem commands far greater interest in India than in Europe or America. Yet the intellectual scenes in India and the West present some striking similarities. Indian history has always been of peripheral interest to educated Westerners, who trace their cultural lineage to ancient Greece and Israel. A few specialists might try to change this perception by pointing to Egypt, say, or Babylonia. But India lies outside this mainstream, for the most part, and is consigned primarily to a few departments of Indology, which are dominated by scholars of comparative linguistics and mythology. As a result, Western Indology suffers from a weak scholarly base and does little more than continue nineteenth-century trends. Lacking the intellectual fervor characteristic of nineteenth-century pioneers, modern Indological research in the West lacks originality and freshness. There is certainly no new Müller in the present generation of Western Indologists.

In Europe and America, without that nineteenth-century pioneering spirit, most of the original contributions now come from scholars outside the mainstream of Indology departments. A. Seidenberg was an American mathematician and historian of science; he made a monumental contribution to Indology, however, with his comparative study of Vedic mathematics and the mathematics of Egypt and Babylonia. Frawley, Georg Feuerstein, and Subhash Kak are other notable examples.

The current Indian intellectual scene, with its continued attachment to

the Aryan-invasion theory, is little more than an extension of old colonial policies. Only the sponsors have changed. This is the result of feudal educational policies imposed by Indian leaders in the wake of independence. In a feudal court, it is often the courtier, rather than the scholar, who prospers. In any case, not one distinctive contribution has been made by Indian historians belonging to the elite establishment. Their achievement to date consists of recasting Indian history along Marxist lines by replacing race with caste and then caste with class. Otherwise, their work is indistinguishable from any of the nineteenth-century formulations. This situation is further confused by the influence of contemporary politics, as is evident in the following passage from Romila Thapar, an establishment Indian historian:

> The theory of the Aryans being a people has been seen as fundamental to the understanding of the identity of modern Indians and the question of identity is central to the change in Indian society from caste to class. The upholding of a false theory [of Aryans as indigenous to India] is dangerous. The next step can be to move from the indigenous origin of "the Aryans" to propagating the notion of an "Aryan nation" (1992: 23–24).

This observation is puzzling, to say the least, and it is not at all clear what any of it has to do with ancient history. The first part about class and caste is standard Marxist fare. But Thapar's foray into futurology, the prediction that an "Aryan nation" could emerge from the discovery that the "Aryans" are native to India, is irrelevant to the history of India. It is relevant, however, to modern politics. The dreaded "Aryan nation," which she fears as the "next step," was a European invention. In thousands of years, Indians have created nothing even remotely resembling Nazi Germany. What about all the evidence from archaeology, ancient mathematics, and the Vedas? Are we to discard such evidence and cling to the Aryan-invasion theory because of a perceived political threat that is based on the misinterpretation of a Sanskrit word? Thapar is still unaware that the Nazi understanding of the word "*ārya*" is a perversion, entirely unrelated to its original Sanskrit meaning.

Despite this lack of vitality, there are reasons for optimism about the future course of historical studies now being brought about by fusions of East and West, tradition and science. Historical research is being revitalized by a fresh examination of ancient records using methods based on modern science. This approach could transform our knowledge of ancient times by pushing back the historical age of the ancient world—and not just of India—by several thousand years. This book is an example of what Indian tradition and a penchant for linguistics, combined with Western science, can offer. What was prehistory is on the verge of becoming part of history.