Aryan [Āryan]

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Synonyms

Ārya

Definition

Aryan is the anglicized form of the Sanskrit word “ārya.” In the ancient literature of India (both Hindu and Buddhist), the word “ārya” had different meanings, among which predominant was “noble” or “respectable.” In the nineteenth century, European philologists came to identify “Aryan” or “Indo-European” as a specific family of languages. Subsequently, the concept of Aryan as a linguistic category came to be conflated with that of Aryan as a racial category. Many believed that the original homeland of the Aryan people was somewhere in central Asia, from where they migrated to India. Thus, there developed the idea of two opposite cultures in India – Aryan and Dravidian – and the course of writing the history of India came to be determined by such conceptions. Many scholars have challenged the views that Aryan is a racial category, that they migrated to India from outside, and that the origin and development of Indian civilization bear witness to a conflict of Aryan and Dravidian cultures.

Introduction

The Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English dictionary defines the word “ārya” as: “a respectable or honourable or faithful man, an inhabitant of Āryāvarta; one who is faithful to the religion of his country; N. of the race which immigrated from Central Asia into Āryāvarta (opposed to an-ārya, dasyu, dāsa); in later times N. of the first three castes (opposed to ṣūdra). . .”. The dictionary continues to enumerate more meanings that the term acquired in course of time. The word was also used widely in Buddhist literature. Of all meanings stated, there is one with far-reaching ideological assumptions embedded in it, and it is not based on any ancient source in Sanskrit or other language, but is a product of modern times. The concept of Aryan as “the race which immigrated from Central Asia into Āryāvarta (opposed to an-ārya, dasyu, dāsa)” is a product of European and colonial Indian knowledge production in the nineteenth century.

The history of this concept is vast and intertextual. This entry will deal with this history and its implications in a brief yet representative manner. In the historiography of the concept, one can predominantly discern two opposite views. Some scholars and intellectuals argue that “Aryan” was not a racial category in ancient
India, and its invention as a linguistic and racial concept is a modern phenomenon rooted in the colonial and Orientalist context, and that the concept has no scientific basis and has distorted the understanding of Indian history. For some others, the Aryan/Dravidian divide is real and palpable, especially from the linguistic point of view. They believe in this foundational classification of languages and their other arguments follow this main premise as a logical corollary. The implications of this debate are, however, not restricted to the domain of linguistics alone. It has produced different ideological offshoots in terms of issues related to ethnic and caste identity, and its major ramification can be noticed regarding the issue of the historical origin of the Indian people itself, as articulated in the Aryan migration debate.

The final edition of Monier-Williams’s dictionary was published in 1899. Late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were witness to four nodal moments: formulation of the concept of Indo-European, later becoming identical with Aryan; formulation of the concept of Dravidian; the conflation of initially linguistic categories like Aryan and Dravidian with racial categories, thereby bringing into existence the concept of Aryan and Dravidian cultures that are supposedly opposed to each other; and fitting the archaeological discovery of Harappa into this pregiven racial-linguistic framework.

Of Language Families and Homelands

In his “Third anniversary discourse” at the Asiatic Society, Calcutta in 1786 (later published in Asiatic Researches in 1788), Sir William Jones (1746–1794) proposed a list of languages like Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, etc., that have an unmistakable likeness with each other. There had been others who had noted the likeness of Sanskrit with European languages even before Jones’s proclamation (for details, see [3], p. 16). However, given Jones’s stature and reputation, his assertions received wide publicity among intellectuals. Based on the resemblance between languages, Jones argued that they must have originated from the same ancestor language which probably no longer existed. Later-day linguists called this hypothetical ancestor language Proto-Indo-European, and the family of languages of which Sanskrit, Greek, etc., are a part came to be known as Indo-European.

The concept of the Indo-European language family was consolidated by the pioneering work in comparative philology by Franz Bopp (1791–1867) with successive publications starting from 1816. However, the term “Indo-European” was coined by the linguist Thomas Young in 1816 [3]; Bopp referred to this family of languages as “Indo-Germanic” [9]. Incidentally, Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) attributed the idea that the languages of India, Persia, Greece, Italy, and Germany are kin, to the German poet Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), who in his work The Language and Wisdom of the Indians (1808), clubbed all these languages together by one single word “Indo-Germanic” ([6], pp. 189–190).

The great Indo-European language family that gradually came to be established consisted of “seven European groups of languages—the Hellenic, Italic, Celtic, Teutonic, Slavonic, Lithuania or Lettic, and Albanian...There are also three closely related Asiatic groups: the Indic, containing fourteen modern Indian languages derived from Sanskrit; secondly, the Iranian group, comprising Zend, Persian, Pushtu or Afghan, Baluchi, Kurdish, and Ossetic; and, thirdly, the Armenian, which is intermediate between Greek and Iranian” ([9], p. 2).

It was Max Müller who popularized the term “Aryan” to denote the Indo-European family of languages (for his reasons for the choice of the word “Aryan,” see [6], pp. 274–289). He accepted the view that there must have been an original homeland of the Aryans located “somewhere in Asia.” He further proposed that the Aryans must have branched off in two directions – one in the North-Western direction, thereby reaching Europe, and the other in the South-Eastern direction, reaching Iran and India [6, 7].

The idea of a common original homeland of all Aryans was a pure hypothesis with no hard evidence as its basis, and it was formulated mainly as an explanation for the resemblance among
languages. While Max Müller argued for an erstwhile common homeland and a branching off of Aryan populations in two directions, it should be highlighted that he was not willing to work it out further as he saw that no evidence provided a definitive clue in re-constructing the whole story. He, thus, remarked: “…evidence is sufficient to prove that the people who spoke Sanskrit and Zend must have remained united for some time after they had left the common Aryan home...Beyond this, however, all is uncertain and mere guesswork. It was my chief object...to warn scholars against wasting their time on an impossible problem...the problem of the gradual separation of the Aryan languages, beyond the great split into a North-Western and South-Eastern branch, is...insoluble, and must be abandoned.” ([7], pp. 85–87)

Thus, for Max Müller, “Aryas were originally strangers in India” ([7], p. 93), they were the “first conquerors and masters of India.” It is important to note here that there were many European intellectuals, who believed instead that India was the cradle of civilization and the original homeland of the Aryans, who migrated from the Indian territory to the west and north-west (for details, see [3], p. 18). However, this view got suppressed in course of time, as the idea of Aryan invaders of India gained ascendancy.

On the other hand, in the same year as Bopp’s publication, 1816, was published a Telugu grammar text written by A D Campbell with a “Note to the Introduction” by F W Ellis (1777–1819), a British civil servant in India. Ellis argued that Telugu, Kannada, and Tamil are related languages and are not derived from Sanskrit. Forty years later, the missionary Robert Caldwell (1814–1891) published his Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Languages (1856), which formalized the concept of “Dravidian” languages. Thus, on the one hand, the concept of Aryan came to take shape and on the other, that of Dravidian. In the next section, we examine how initially linguistic categories such as Aryan/Dravidian came to be conflated with racial categories.

Race Meets Language

Max Müller clarified several times that Aryan was a language and not a race. He himself at times used the expression “Aryan race,” but what he probably meant was not “race” in its strict technical sense; for him, “…if we speak of Aryan race at all, we should know that it means no more than x + Aryan speech” ([7], p. 90). But soon, a shift came in terms of claiming Aryans to be a race as well.

George Campbell (1824–1892), who served as the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, published his Ethnology of India in 1866 as a special issue of the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. According to Thomas Trautmann, although Campbell ventured to classify the Indian people on the basis of the five criteria of “physical appearance, language, religion, laws (especially caste and marriage), and manners and mental characteristics,”, he ended up keeping language subordinate in this scheme and “the overall drift of the work is to establish a relation between physical form and the remaining ‘civilizational’ criteria…” ([10], p. 161). H. H. Risley (1851–1911) served as an administrator in colonial India and rose to prominence as an ethnologist of India in the 1890s. In his book Tribes and Castes of Bengal (1892), he arrived at a racial classification of Indians on the basis of the measurement of their nose. This was probably the first instance where anthropometric data were used for an ethnographic survey. Risley categorized Indians into seven racial categories, of which five bore the terms Aryan or Dravidian: Indo-Aryan, Seytho-Dravidian, Aryo-Dravidian, Mongolo-Dravidian, and Dravidian ([4], p. 53).

In course of time, these racial concepts related to the Indian people developed in a full-blown manner. The moment of colonial knowledge production on India coincided with the moment of ascendancy of what has been called the pseudo-science of evolutionist racial ethnology in Victorian Britain. As observed by many scholars, the emergence of the concept of Aryan as a race was a symptom of viewing human civilization in terms of superior or inferior races, where undoubtedly European or the original Aryan was a superior group of people. A racial concept of Aryan or
Dravidian got so entrenched in the discourse on India that many studies uncritically accepted this conception as a fact and never questioned its premise.

**The Aryan Invasion Theory**

The framework of Aryan/Dravidian language/race being already in place, when the ancient sites of Harappa and Mohenjodaro were discovered, it was just a matter of superimposition of concepts such as Aryan and Dravidian to the newly discovered Indus Valley Civilization.

The reports of the archaeological excavations conducted in Harappa and Mohenjodaro were published in the Archaeological Survey Annual Report of 1920–1921 and 1922–1923 respectively. In 1926 and 1929, the Archaeological Survey of India published two memoirs by R. P. Chanda, the then Superintendent of the Archaeological Section of the Indian Museum, Calcutta. In the first publication, Chanda contended that the civilization discovered in Harappa and Mohenjodaro appeared to be non-Vedic and that it was destroyed by successive waves of Aryan invaders. He thus wrote: “These invaders who in the Rigveda call themselves Arya met in the southern part of the valley a civilized people who lived in cities and castles...The Arya conquerors...either destroyed the cities or allowed them to fall into ruin. Their great god Indra is called Puroha or Purandara, ‘sacker of cities’” (cited in [4], p. 59). Thus, his broad argument was that the Indus Civilization was pre-Vedic and non-Vedic. However, Chanda also mentioned the possibilities of interaction between the Aryans and the Indus civilization people. By the time his second monograph was published in 1929, the theme of interaction and co-existence of the Aryans and the Indus people became dominant in his writing. He, in fact, ruminated on the possibilities of a “mixed Hindu civilization” born as a result of this interaction (for details of Chanda’s views, see [4], pp. 57–64 & p. 67).

John Marshall in his 1931 report on Mohenjodaro was of the view that the Indus and Vedic cultures were “unrelated.” In his report, Marshall summarized the contemporary positions on the racial composition of the inhabitants of Mohenjodaro and Harappa. By the time, this report was published, “the question of the affiliation of the Indus civilization in terms of two main groups of Indian languages—the Dravidian and the Indo-Aryan—was discussed and the discussion pattern had already taken a shape which...has continued to this day” ([4], p. 69).

Now, how did these formulations come about? How did the newly discovered civilization come to be associated with a non-Aryan culture? Max Müller had suggested a tentative date for the Rig Veda at c. 1200 BCE and he himself claimed that this was a hypothetical and minimum date. When the Harappan civilization was discovered, it was dated on the basis of its Mesopotamian links – objects similar to those found in the Indus Valley Civilization were also found in cultural deposits in Western Asia in a datable period of 3rd millennium BCE. The natural conclusion was that the Indus Valley Civilization was older than the Vedic civilization. Now, Sanskrit, the language in which the Vedic literature is composed, was supposedly an Aryan language and was associated with Aryan culture. On the other hand, most archaeologists read the Harappan culture to be non-Vedic and therefore non-Aryan. It is to be noted that the grounds for this interpretation are not particularly sound. These are based on interpretation of certain words and names mentioned in the Rigvedic hymns (as is the case with Chanda) or on grounds such that the Vedic culture was agro-pastoral, while the people of Mohenjodaro lived in cities (as argued by Marshall).

Not that these ideas were accepted by all without any disputation, yet they gained the upper hand. What was suggested by Chanda as a possible invasion of the Indus Valley cities by the Aryans, found credence in the declarations of Mortimer Wheeler in the report of his excavations at Harappa in 1946: “Here we have a highly evolved civilization of essentially non-Āryan type...What destroyed this firmly settled civilization?...its ultimate extinction is more likely to have been completed by deliberate and large-scale destruction. It may be no mere chance that
at a late period of Mohenjo-daro men, women and children appear to have been massacred there” (cited in [5], p. 14). The inference of a large-scale massacre was drawn on the basis of numerous skeletons that were found in the course of the excavation. George F. Dales has rightly called it “The Mythical Massacre at Mohenjo-daro” (1964) as it is based on thin evidence. It has now been accepted that the skeletons do not prove that there was a large-scale massacre as they have been found to belong to different periods [5]. The theory of an “invasion” has now been discredited and abandoned. However, many scholars still continue to argue that the Aryans came from outside, and they now propose that it was a case of migration. Different views have emerged and research developed in different fields such as archaeology, linguistics, and genetics.

The debate whether the “Aryans” came to India from outside or were the indigenous people of India still continues. From an archaeological point of view, there is no evidence of migration. Moreover, the discovery of the once-existing Sarasvati River (identified with the present-day Ghaggar-Hakra) as one of the chief makers of the Indus Valley Civilization puts into question the view that the Harappan and Vedic cultures are different. The river has been mentioned several times in the Rigveda as being a vibrant and powerful river in full flow, while it was the drying up of this river that was one of the factors for the decline of the Harappan civilization (a case in point is the decline of the Indus Valley site of Kalibangan which is situated on the banks of Ghaggar). Archaeologists like S. R. Rao and B. B. Lal argue that there has been cultural continuity between the Harappan culture and the later-day culture of the region and Indian society in general; hence, the question of cultural disruption due to the presence of people of foreign origin does not arise. Particularly noteworthy are the discovery of fire-altars at the sites of Lothal and Kalibangan, and shiva-linga like structures in Kalibangan, Harappa, and Mohenjodaro.

On the other hand, some scholars who approach the issue from a linguistic point of view do not accept the position that the Aryans were indigenous to India. For instance, Asko Parpola, who has worked on the Indus script, is of the opinion that the writing on the Indus seals seems to belong to the Dravidian family of languages. Based on his study of Vedic Sanskrit, Michael Witzel too argues for an initial “trickling in” or immigration of Indo-Aryans (the Indic branch of the Indo-European family) into India. It may be noted that these works consider the primary classification of languages, which was a product of colonial knowledge production, as sacrosanct, and do not offer a view on Indian language and culture from an independent point of reference. According to archaeologist Dilip K. Chakrabarti: “Personally, my reading of how the Aryan idea has developed its importance in the study of ancient India and how the idea itself formed a keystone of the race-language-culture based approach to history makes me feel convinced that the Aryan idea, as Leon Poliakov (1996) argued before me, is nothing but a racist myth. I cannot comment on the soundness or otherwise of the basic linguistic premises built around it, but I do know that ‘comparative philology’/’historical linguistics’/’linguistic paleontology’ has essentially put forward unverifiable or untestable arguments and that there is absolutely no reason why archaeology should consider its own testimony incomplete unless it fits into a plainly hypothetical linguistic framework” ([4], p. 93).

**Caste Considerations**

As pointed out by Susan Bayly, for many colonial ethnographers of India, insights derived from race theory “outweighed or at least sharply modified notions of ‘caste’ as a fundamental fact of Indian history or Indian social organization. Theorists...who were widely read in official circles, were supporters of an emerging ethnological orthodoxy which portrayed India as a composite social landscape in which only certain peoples, those of superior ‘Aryan’ blood, had evolved historically in ways which left them ‘shackled’ by a hierarchical, Brahmanically-defined ideology of ‘caste’. At the same time large numbers of other Indians—those identified in varying racial terms
as Dravidians, as members of ‘servile classes, aborigines, wild tribes, and those of so-called ‘mixed’ racial origins—were portrayed as being ethnologically distinct from this so-called Aryan population…” ([2], p. 170).

Gradually, therefore, concepts such as Aryan and Dravidian came to be associated with caste-based identity. A notable case in point is the social reformer, Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890). As pointed out by Rosalind O’Hanlon, what informed Phule’s position vis-à-vis the Aryan/Brahmanical-Dravidian/Dalit binary was such constructions of social identity by Christian missionaries. O’Hanlon summarizes: “Phule depicted Brahmins as the descendants of Aryan invaders, who had conquered the indigenous people of India. The Brahmans had usurped the inhabitants’ rightful power and property, and had imposed their religion as an instrument of social control designed to perpetuate their rule. This formed the central polemical device in Phule’s explanation of the sufferings of the lower castes. It was through this argument that he was able to deny the legitimacy of Brahmanic religious authority…In this interpretation of ancient Indian history, it is clear that he had drawn very heavily on the missionary accounts…and in particular on the arguments of John Wilson’s work *India Three Thousand Years Ago*” ([8], p. 141).

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, it may be pointed out that the concept of “Aryan” has had a chequered history. While in ancient Hindu and Buddhist texts “ārya” meant noble or respectable, in modern times, the meaning of this word took a different turn, first in the field of linguistics, and subsequently in racial ethnology. At some point, this racial-linguistic concept also came to be conflated with caste identity in India. There are also several other dimensions and facts related to the Aryan debate, for example, Bal Gangadhar Tilak’s attempt at arriving at a theory of the Arctic Home of the Aryans or Swami Dayananda Sarasvati’s establishment of the Arya Samaj, where Arya was synonymous with authentic Hindu.

There were many takers of the Aryan concept, but many others too who rejected the notion. It should be noted here that the great social reformer B. R. Ambedkar clearly maintained that if the testimony of the Vedic literature is taken into account, the word “Arya” was never used in this literature in any racial sense ([1], p. 62). He further wrote: “What evidence is there of the invasion of India by the Aryan race and the subjugation by it of native tribes? So far as the *Rig Veda* is concerned, there is not a particle of evidence suggesting the invasion of India by the Aryans from outside India. . .so far as the testimony of the Vedic literature is concerned, it is against the theory that the original home of the Aryans was outside India” ([1], p. 68). Ambedkar then traced the origin of the myth of the Aryans coming into India: “The theory of invasion is an invention. This invention is necessary because of a gratuitous assumption which underlies the Western theory. The assumption is that the Indo-Germanic people are the purest of the modern representatives of the original Aryan race” ([1], pp. 73–74).

Finally, no matter how questionable the Aryan concept is, its power and influence in world history has been great. The pursuit of the concept of Aryan as a superior race culminated into the rise of dictatorship in modern Europe (Nazi Germany), and in the case of India, it sadly continues to inform the writing and understanding of Indian history.

**Cross-References**

- Caste, Hinduism
- Colonialism (Hinduism)
- Dayananda Sarasvati
- Dravidian (Hinduism)
- Indus Valley Civilization
- Jones, William
- Monier-Williams, Monier
- Müller, Friedrich Max
- Orientalism (Hinduism)
- Phule, Jyotirao
- *Rg Veda*
- Sanskrit
- Tilak, B. G.
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1. Ambedkar BR (1946) Who were the Shudras? How they came to be the fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society. Thacker & Co., Bombay