

Lost in the hall of mirrors

The linguistics of *Aryan* as a knowledge domain in colonial and postcolonial India

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The category *Aryan* and the paradigm of ideas associated with it remains highly controversial in contemporary India, and the history, status, and impact of this concept are contested at many levels. This paper starts with the assumption that the genesis of this concept lies in Western linguistic theorizing, and analyzes in outline the reception and impact of Aryan Invasion Theory and the postulation of an Aryan-Dravidian divide. Radical Hindu nationalists reject all aspects of the colonial scholarship of India; other Indian scholars see Western scholarship as authoritative to the extent that it falls within the framework of secular modernity. The argument made here is that the entire Aryan paradigm rests on a faulty set of academic presumptions and that its impact has been more long lasting and destructive than even the application of race theory to the understanding of India. In this sense the paper accepts the criticisms made by radical Hindu nationalists of colonial linguistics, and this raises further complex issues about knowledge production and application, scholarly expertise and authority.

Keywords: Aryan, Aryan Invasion Theory, Dravidian, colonial and postcolonial linguistics, Hindutva, Dalits

1. Introduction

This paper offers an analysis of the category *Aryan* and the competing versions of Indian history associated with it. It understands the controversy as representing not only the intricate and divisive politics of knowledge in post-colonial contexts, but also, specifically, the complex relationship between the academic discipline of linguistics and “insider” epistemological frameworks, both academic and non-academic. The central issue discussed here is the status of claims about the ancient Indian past based on modern (i.e. post-1800) linguistic analysis. It asks whether

such claims are to be recognized as valid scholarly insights about India, and whether the framing of the Aryan paradigm as a form of colonial knowledge has any impact on their perceived status as academically validated propositions. The Aryan paradigm is particularly apposite to illustrate these intellectual and ideological tensions, as it spans the entire modern history of Western linguistics, from around 1800 to the present.

Today, in Western academia, the Aryan paradigm is the domain of specialist scholars in Indo-European linguistics, archeology, Indology, and ancient history; however, in the Indian sub-continent the category *Aryan* remains fundamental to public debates about history and identity (see Pereltsvaig & Lewis, 2015). The historiographical debate in relation to Nazi ideology has been vitiated by the erroneous assertion that Nazi racial anthropology promoted the idea of an “Aryan race”.¹ The Aryan question in India today takes us to the heart of postcolonial debates about the impact of colonial knowledge production on postcolonial polities (Seth, 2009). These debates are now intertwined in highly complex ways with “the politics of knowledge as reflected in the colonial and postcolonial histories of South Asia” (Deshpande, 2006: 98). The basic ingredients of the scholarly paradigm are: the postulation of a common origin for the Indo-European languages (*proto-Indo-European*), the assumption that this original language was spoken by an identifiable group of people (the *Aryans or Indo-Europeans*), the belief that this people occupied an identifiable original homeland, and the widely-held assumption that this homeland was situated outside of India. A massive scholarly industry arose seeking to identify location of the original homeland.

For postcolonial critics, colonial philology and linguistics “began the establishment of a discursive formation, defined an epistemological space, created a discourse (Orientalism), and had the effect of converting Indian forms of knowledge into European objects” (Cohn, 1996: 21). This process represented “the invasion of an epistemological space” occupied by “a great number of diverse Indian scholars, intellectuals, scribes, priests, lawyers, officials, merchants, and bankers” who were to become “part of the army of babus, clerks, interpreters, sub-inspectors, munshis, pandits, qazis, vakils, schoolmasters, amins, sharistadars, tahsildars, desh mukhs, and mamlatdars” that served the Raj (Cohn, 1996: 21). One problem that has arisen with arguments that draw on Foucault in seeing colonial states as engaged in profoundly reordering and reconfiguring the premodern order is that this appears to grant to the colonial state a kind of categorical omniscience. This has been at the heart of debates about the relationship between colonial governance and the caste system (Dirks, 2001).

1. On the term *Aryan* and National Socialism, see Hutton (2005).

Comparative philology represented a profound challenge to traditional understandings of texts, not least in that it vested interpretative authority in a set of specialist scholarly methodologies, rather than in those in possession of sacred erudition. As in other analogous encounters, including that involving the Bible, there was an inevitable clash between the explanatory framework and historical narrative derived from a scholarly textual and historiographical approach when this was set against received understandings of how sacred texts were to be understood, their place within ritual culture, and the authority relationships and social forms that clustered around them. Comparativism as a method meant the adducing of diverse texts from different periods and regions, rather than the following of the internal contours of particular scribal and liturgical traditions.

Comparative philology and its successor (and rival) comparative-historical linguistics involved the radical abstraction of sacred texts from their normative patterns of use and accumulated layers of interpretation, projecting such texts onto linear historical time, mapping the interrelationships between texts and their relative and absolute dates, and seeking to bring order among variants produced by scribal or oral reproduction. These decontextualized or projected entities are then recontextualized within historical debates, acting as a prism through which archeological and anthropological finding are viewed and discussed. This involves a transition between two contrasting understandings of expertise and authority. In theory, the methods of comparative philology and historical linguistics, as they developed, were there for anyone with sufficient training to use. While access to that training required entrance to an elite scholarly education, the knowledge itself was understood to be distinct and separable from the identity of the scholar. By contrast, sacred knowledge is understood as intrinsically role-related; the interpretation of texts reflects the social standing, scholarly lineage, theological school, or hermeneutic tradition of the interpreter.

In India, historical claims about the distant past are central to assertions of cultural and political ownership, to notions of authenticity, organic solidarity and unity. In the course of British colonial rule a highly complex and dynamic set of interactions took place between colonial scholarship and colonial administration, pre-existing modes of textual knowledge and interpretation, and evolving Indian self-understandings as expressed in scholarly and other writings. Neither the conventional model of pioneering discovery nor Edward Said's critique of Orientalism (1978) as totalizing discourse do justice to the complexity of the "dialogic conditions" of the emergence of colonial expertise (Tavakoli-Targhi, 2003:98). The process of adoption, adaption and rejection of colonial scholarship, and the broader epistemological framework for which it stands, continues to this day.

This paper attempts to provide a critical overview of the key elements of this intellectual landscape. It does so by embedding the discussion of intellectual

history within controversies in India today. Hindu revivalist nationalism rejects the authority of both colonial scholarship and contemporary models of academic knowledge, claiming ownership of intellectual authority over Indian history, culture and religion. But this position is challenged within India by voices representing both secular modernity and indigenous identities. The paper uses Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT) to illustrate the various “insider” and “outsider” positions that have been taken up, focusing on notions of academic authority and positioning in linguistics. The question, in brief, is the status of “neutral” or “Western” or “secular” academic expertise when confronted with a militantly postcolonial and puristic politics of knowledge.

2. Hindu revivalist nationalism

Essential to understanding the Aryan debate is the narrative form required by the modern nation state. India, like China, is reflective in its vast size and borders of a premodern imperial polity. In China’s case, this was the border of the Qing Empire; in the case of India, the modern state is constituted from the core of the British imperial state, with Pakistan (subsequently divided into Pakistan and Bangladesh), and Burma carved out from it. The only other polity that rivaled the British Raj in extent was the dynasty of Ashoka (approximately 268 to 232 BCE). Modern history writing is primarily a national form, yet in the case of India it is required to encompass the timespan and diversity of a vast civilizational area. It is not possible to do justice to the contextual complexities of historically attested categories of people, languages, texts, migrations, and ritual practices, without an extreme degree of categorical compression. At its simplest, the binary of invader and invade, provides this, and also offers a model that can be subject to polemical challenge in the service of an ideology of indigenous continuity.

From the early 1990s, an increasingly self-assertive Hindu political and cultural nationalism can be discerned, both within India and in the diaspora, resulting in vocal criticism of scholarly works and cultural products deemed to distort or defame Hinduism. The broader ideological movement is often termed *Hindutva*, with its roots in the 1920s, most closely associated with the pro-independence activist Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966) and the paramilitary movement the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, (RSS), founded in 1925 by Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889–1940). *Hindutva* is an ethnic or ethno-religious concept rather than a purely religious one. It embraces members of what is defined as the Indian *Volk* proper, including not only Hindus, but Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains,

but excluding Christians and Moslems (Deshpande, 2003:79).² The focus of this concept is on national integration or reintegration.

A key historical event was the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh on December 6, 1992 (Momin, 2017). This followed many years of agitation for Hindu access to the site (believed to be the birthplace of Rama) by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a dispute over ownership and authenticity that reflected the contentious layering of India's past. The Hindu activist point of view was explained by Elst as follows (1991: [i]):

The Ayodhya movement, which wants to reintegrate the sacred place of Ram Janmabhoomi into the living Hindu tradition by building a Mandir on it, is at the same time an invitation to the Muslim Indians to reintegrate themselves into the society and the culture from which their ancestors were cut off by fanatical rulers and their thought police, the theologians. It is thus an exercise in national integration.

In 1995 Bombay was officially renamed Mumbai, at the prompting of the Shiv Sena party, led by its controversial founder, Bal Thackeray (1926–2012). Shiv Sena is a Maharashtra-based party promoting Hindutva ideology, founded in 1966.

In 2000 Rajiv Malhotra founded the Infinity Foundation in New Jersey, USA,³ as a platform for promoting criticism of Hinduism Studies in the United States (see Ramaswamy, de Nicolas & Banerjee, 2007). In 2005, Hindu advocacy groups (Hindu American Foundation, Hindu Education Foundation, the Vedic Foundation) called for revisions to school textbooks in California in relation to their presentation of the ancient Indian past.⁴ A particular target of Rajiv Malhotra's polemics has been Western universalism, as well as the notion that colonialism and Western influence triggered the reform of Hinduism, leading to its institutional and doctrinal unification (Malhotra, 2014). The textbook controversy prompted an intervention by Michael Witzel, professor of Sanskrit at Harvard University (Kelly, 2016:8), as well as opposition from groups such as the South Asian Faculty Group (SAFG), supported by representatives of Sikhs, Dalits and Muslims. Their objection was that the textbook controversy represented an attempt by Hindu nationalists to impose a revisionist version of Indian history (Bhutia, 2016). Controversy flared up again in 2016, with the Hindu American

2. See critiques in Basu et al. (1993), Iliaih (1996), Thapar (2000).

3. infinityfoundation.com.

4. In addition to New Jersey, Asian-Americans of Indian origin have a substantial presence in Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Jose. There is an important Indian presence in the technology industry and Hindu advocacy is driven by middle-class professionals. On the associated youth culture, see Shankar (2008).

Foundation eventually declaring victory over groups such as South Asian Histories for All (SAHFA).⁵ SAHFA by contrast viewed the approved textbooks as containing “discriminatory portrayals of Muslims”, and erasing “the histories of Buddhists, Dalits (those formerly and pejoratively known as ‘untouchables’), Sikhs, and other South Asian communities”.⁶ One particularly contentious issue has been whether primarily to use the term *India* or *South Asia* to denote the region historically (Yap, 2016).

Advocates of these changes talk in terms of Orientalism and of freeing Indian history and culture from the distorting effects of its colonial and Western legacy; opponents diagnose the “saffronising” of history. Publications that have sparked controversy include *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India*, by James Laine (2003). This work involved a narrative of the life of the seventeenth century ruler Shivaji Bhonsle, the founder of the Maratha kingdom or empire. It was withdrawn from publication in India, but in 2004 there was nonetheless an attack on the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) in Pune, Maharashtra, with which Laine had been associated.⁷ In 2010 the Supreme Court of India struck down all restrictions on the publication and circulation of the book ([ToI] 2010). A more recent episode was the public burning of Chicago Indologist Wendy Doniger’s *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (Doniger, 2014; Prashad, 2014). In a reflection on these two episodes, Laine pointed to the communalities between the two cases, in that both he and Doniger were non-Hindu, non-Indian outsiders, but also the differences (2014:713):

Mr. Batra, Doniger’s opponent, is a member of the RSS, a Brahman-dominated, nationalist organisation committed to the defence of Hinduism (essentialised and defined by a narrow orthodoxy), or at least Hindutva, ‘Hinduness’. Though some Hindu nationalists have criticised my work, my primary critics were members of a Maratha caste organisation. In their minds, I had been duped by Brahman scholars into writing derogatory things about the Maratha Shivaji. [...] They are certainly not Right-wing Hindu fanatics, but Leftist egalitarians who sometimes go so far as to reject Hinduism altogether as the oppressive religion of Brahmans.

5. www.hafsite.org/hindu-americans-win-historic-victory-california-textbooks, accessed January 16, 2018.

6. Accessed January 16, 2018.

7. See *The Complete Review*, volume 5, issue 1 (February 2004), available at: www.complete-review.com.

3. The Aryan paradigm

The conventional starting point for the Aryan paradigm is the famous essay by Sir William Jones (1746–1794) (1799) (see Trautmann, 1997; Heller & McElhinny, 2017: 42–56). The relevant paragraph, much cited (and misunderstood), is one of the most famous in the history of linguistics (Jones, 1799):

The Sanskrit language, whatever may be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either; yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologist could examine the Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists.

One less noticed feature of this paragraph is the normative language used – terms like “wonderful”, “perfect”, “copious”, “exquisitely refined”, reflecting ideal features of morphology and vocabulary as understood within eighteenth century approaches to language (Steadman-Jones, 2007: 49). While mainstream accounts locate the origin of modern comparative-historical linguistics in this essay, Jones was working within the eighteenth paradigm that took its frame of reference from the Book of Genesis. The key term in this early modern speculative philology was *affinity*, referring to the reputed connections between peoples as evidenced by etymological evidence, in particular between modern nations and the Biblical sons of Noah. Long before Jones we can find recognition of similarities between Asian and European languages, and the model of human diversity proposed by Jones bears no relation to later nineteenth century frameworks within Indo-European linguistics (Campbell, 2007). Jones has likewise been misidentified as the origin of Aryanism and he had no concept of an Aryan people or race, indigenous or otherwise (Hutton, 2013). Nonetheless British colonial scholarship gave impetus to a European fascination with ancient India, and with the Sanskrit language in particular. “Indomania” was particularly pronounced in Germany, and was one of the formative constituents of German Romanticism (see Willson, 1964; Leifer, 1971; McGetchin, 2009; Cowan, 2010). It was Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), who generalized the term *Arier* and made it stand for the ancestors of the Germans. Schlegel was writing against the background of the Napoleonic conquests, and his concern was with the historical grounding and “lineage” of the Germans (Schlegel, 1819; Toreff-Ashkenazi, 2009; Messling, 2016). Schlegel is the true founder of the Aryan paradigm in its modern, ideological sense.

The Aryan paradigm was on the surface a set of hypotheses and historical assertions about ancient India, yet in its deeper structures it concerned primarily

European civilization and its own self-understandings (Figueira, 2002:16off.). Nonetheless the impact of these historical speculations on India was profound. At the centre of these debates was the question of the Aryan invasion. In the mid-nineteenth century, Western scholars began formulating what became known as Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT), i.e. the hypothesis that superior Aryan invaders, the creators of classical Vedic culture, conquered India after invading from the northwest, subdued the indigenous inhabitants, before intermarrying with less advanced and presumptively darker skinned indigenous inhabitants. This miscegenation led to the decline of India from its ancient glory.

On this model, British colonialism represented a younger, more vigorous branch of the Aryan fraternity, now in a position to revive and re-elevate a fallen but, in some (ambivalent) sense, related branch of the same family (Maw, 1990: 36–37; Farrar, 1878: 306–7; Leopold, 1974). Chakrabarti explains this view as follows (2009:11):

By the time the British came as rulers, the ancient Aryan civilization of India was degraded, and its rejuvenation could take place only under the British rule which in fact was a modern Aryan rule, because linguistically and racially the Anglo-Saxons were placed within the pristine Aryan fold.

A key element of the paradigm was the notion that language was the key to historical affinities and the charting of prehistory. This was powerfully argued by F. Max Müller (1823–1900), the major intellectual force behind the popularization of the Aryan hypothesis and the notion of an Aryan invasion (1860: 13):

The evidence of language is irrefragable, and it is the only evidence worth listening to with regard to ante-historical periods. It would have been next to impossible to discover any traces of relationships between the swarthy natives of India and their conquerors, whether Alexander or Clive, but for the testimony borne by language.

Only linguistics could give insight into the prehistorical relationships (1860: 14):

There was a time when the ancestors of the Celts, the Germans, the Slavonians, the Greeks, and Italians, the Persians and the Hindus, were living together within the same fences, separate from the ancestors of the Semitic and Turanian races.

The assumption in Western scholarship as it developed during the nineteenth century was that this invasion took place between 2000 and 1500 BCE. In the twentieth century, excavations by the Archeological Survey of India suggested that this Aryan conquest displaced the pre-existing Bronze Age civilization of the Indus

valley, or Harappan civilization.⁸ The period from 2000 to 500 BCE is generally reckoned to be the Vedic period, i.e. the time frame of the foundational Hindu scriptures, the Vedas (*Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda*, and *Atharvaveda*). The most widely translated and circulated of these texts in the West has been the Upanishads, generally held to represent the core philosophical tenets of Hinduism, a key part of the reception of Eastern texts in the West (Clarke, 2002). But like every other aspect of this topic, these dates are contested – for example, Satya Swarup Misra dates the *Rigveda* as far back as 5000 BCE. It therefore follows from the fact that the *Rigveda* was composed in India that “India [...] must be the original home of the Indo-Aryans as well as the Iranians” (Misra, 2005: 224–5).

One important story is the rise of an Indian intellectual elite in the nineteenth century, which responded in a variety of ways to the accumulated colonial scholarship, and to the form of authoritarian modernity represented by colonial governance following the Indian Rebellion of 1857. One central and complex figure was Rammohan Roy (1744–1833), the founder of the social and religious reformist and revivalist movement, the Brahmo Samaj. This movement represented a pioneering attempt to reconcile Eastern religion with Christianity within a universal framework. In the dynamic interactions between colonial scholarship, missionaries and these Indian social reform movements Aryan Invasion Theory was a key component (Banerjee, 2016). In 1873, Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890) founded the Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of Seekers of Truth), which “denounced the caste system completely and rejected the Vedas as the opportunistic creation of upper caste Hindus” (Banerjee, 2016: 41). The golden age had been the time before the invasion by barbaric Aryans “when the lower castes were in the ascendant” (Thapar, 1996: 7). In this way, Aryan Invasion Theory fed dissent between Indian social and ethnic groups, in that the “oppressed classes vented their frustration toward upper-caste Hindus and fully accepted AIT [Aryan Invasion Theory]”, while many upper-caste Hindus “embraced the newfound brotherhood with their colonial rulers” (Banerjee, 2016: 41).

The historian Romila Thapar has argued that from the mid-nineteenth century onwards what was an “amorphous” Hinduism was increasingly centralized, standardized and monolithic, linked to an emergent nationalist ideology, and, to a degree, taking on certain features of monotheistic religions such as Christianity or Islam (Thapar, 1989: 210, 2001). The key institution was the Arya Samaj, a reformist Hindu movement founded by Dayananda Saraswatiin (1824–1883) in 1875. From the outside, one might argue that these militant, revivalist reassertions of tradition and anti-colonial authenticity constitute a direct response to the pressures engendered by (colonial) modernity; yet these responses occlude the impact

8. These findings were made by John Marshall (1876–1958) and by R.D. Banerji (1885–1930).

of modernity by denying or seeking to transcend any substantial epistemological or institutional rupture. The urge to draw on and protect a pure, undefiled tradition is expressed in organizational structures (political parties, youth movements, uniforms, codified rituals) that are themselves products of the very modernity that is rejected.

In this sense, Aryanism then provided “a cohesive ideology” for colonial resistance: “By extolling the virtue and superiority of the ancient Aryas, Hindu ideologues were able to contest British claims of inherent racial superiority” (Ballantyne, 2002: 185). One additional source of “discord between traditional exegesis and Western scholarship” was the absence of any mention in the Vedic texts of an Aryan homeland outside of India; a further source of contention were readings of the Vedic texts through the lens of racial theory, in particular the dichotomy between the Aryas and the Dāsas or Dasyus (Bryant, 2001: 59). What was at stake was the authentic ownership of the ancient Aryans.

Yet British colonial discourse was itself, in part, premised on the superiority of the ancient Aryans (Havell, 1918: 4):

The Aryan people who gradually imposed their civilization upon the whole of India were closely related to that masterful race which in the first or second millennium before Christ began to dominate the shores and islands of the Mediterranean and the Euxine, whose intellectual power gained a supremacy in Europe not less than that won by their fellow Aryans in India.

In this sense, radical Hindu nationalism mirrors one of the colonial discourses of India, namely that of a lost golden age. Saraswati (1996: 11) blames British colonialism for obscuring memory of India’s “glorious past”:

Westernism has taught us false values. [...] To understand, to recapture and live up to the best in our culture it is necessary for a student of history to discover for himself the Āryan discipline, character and outlook and to wrest the secrets of the Vedas.

It was figures such as William Jones and Henry Colebrooke (1765–1837) who developed a “Sanskritocentric” vision of Indian civilization, symbolically relegating other classical languages such as Persian and Arabic to secondary status, a vision in which “post-Vedic Indian history was characterized by decline and degeneration”. India’s lost classical age was on a par with ancient Greece and Rome (Ballantyne, 2002: 31). Colebrooke wrote in a letter to his father that “the Hindu is the most ancient nation of which we have valuable remains, and has been surpassed by none in refinement and civilization”; however in the scene presented to one there was a need to distinguish between “the true and the false, the sublime and the puerile, wisdom and absurdity” (cited in Rocher & Rocher, 2012: 23).

In *Breaking India* the authors offer this assessment of Jones' legacy (Malhotra & Neelakandan, 2011: 38):

The leading Indologist of the late 1700s, Sir William Jones, explained the relationship between Sanskrit and European languages through the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel. Hindu mythologies and scriptures were classified as corruptions of "Christian truth", and the original peoples of India were described as the descendants of Ham who went to India after Noah's deluge. The Biblical myth became the blueprint from which later racial stereotypes and racist interpretations were constructed. It also justified the British rule in India as a civilizing mission to rescue the Indians, who had corrupted the "original Biblical truth".

Jones' framework was indeed drawn from Christianity, in that he sought through a "Mosaic ethnology" "to support the Hamian character of the Hindu nation", i.e. to demonstrate their place in the lineage of Ham, one of the three sons of Noah (Trautmann, 1997: 41–61).

However the same authors recognize Colebrooke's contribution in publishing "an important article which claimed that all Indian languages originated from Sanskrit" (Malhotra & Neelakandan, 2011: 6). They see subsequent colonial linguistics as a key factor in dividing the population of India into distinct, potentially antagonistic, groupings, based on linguistic argumentation and the invader-indigenous binary, i.e. between invading Aryans and indigenous Dravidians. Depending on one's position, the language groupings elaborated by British colonial linguists were the product of a "discovery" (Trautmann, 2006) or an "invention" (Malhotra & Neelakandan, 2011). If the former view, then Sanskrit influence in non-Sanskritic languages or varieties can be presented as a product of socio-cultural and political hegemony rather than original or organic identity. In that 1801 essay, "On the Sankrit and Prákrit languages", Colebrooke argued that "there seems no good reason for doubting that [Sanskrit] was once universally spoken in India" and had been "the language of the Indian courts"; nine-tenths of Hindi could be traced to Sanskrit roots, though it was an open question whether Hindu had an original basis in Sanskrit or not ([1801] 1873: 3, 14, 24–5).

4. The contemporary debate and Aryan invasion theory

The Aryan debate is central to the contemporary construction and deconstruction of contested identities, those of "colonizer and colonized, neo-colonial and Hindu fundamentalist, Vedic Hindu and biblical Christian, Hindu and Muslim, indigene and foreigner, Aryan and Dravidian, and Hindu communal and Marxist secularist" (Bryant, 2001: 267). Aryan invasion theory remains "a commonplace of

Indian education” (Friese, 2001:28). The Aryan-Dravidian divide is institutionalized in academic linguistics, as the Indo-Aryan versus Dravidian distinction. At the same time, the distinction is the subject of vehement attack by “Hindutva and neo-Hindu scholarship” as “pernicious to the unity of the Hindu state” (Fosse, 2005:454).

Put simply, there are two interrelated dimensions to this debate, though with multiple permutations. The first concerns whether there was an Aryan invasion at all. The Aryan invasion hypothesis is rejected by those who see an indigenous Sanskritic identity as the essence of Indian civilization, and who oppose any suggestion that this cultural core was imported from outside (“Indigenous Aryanism”, Bryant, 2001: 267ff.). Talageri (1993) offers an overview of the main positions, from the “leftist” position of an original Dravidian India invaded by Aryans, to a range of “rightist” views, including those that take the date of the Rigveda back tens of thousands of years (e.g. Das, 1921), concluding that “there was no ‘Aryan invasion’ of India but in fact an outflow of groups of ‘Aryans’ from India who carried the speech-family to its present habitats” (Talageri, 1993:360–361). By contrast, secular modern historians find in the Aryan invasion, or migration, narrative support for a vision of Indian civilization as having multiple geographical and historical points of origin, rather than being understood in terms of a simple binary of invader and invaded: “The diffusion of a language does not depend on conquest alone” (Thapar, 2000:27). The Aryan model erased other dimensions of contact and exchange, such as maritime interactions with East Africa and the Arabian peninsula (Kaiwar, 2003:38).

The second debate can be understood as a contestation from below of the “Brahmin” or high caste narrative of Indian history. Put simply, this view sees the higher castes as descendants of invaders of India, who appropriated existing cultural forms, and set up an oppressive regime of domination over the native population. It follows that members of the Scheduled Castes (*Dalits*) are the indigenous people of India (*mool niwasi*), and their struggle for recognition and dignity is analogous to that of similar groups such as those in the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand.⁹ This strand of anti-Hindu writings in essence equates Aryanism with colonialism or imperialism, positioning the non-Hindu as colonized by the caste system and foreign invaders, making British colonialism an extension or continuation of other forms of Aryan domination. Notable examples

9. Terminology in this area, as might be expected, is highly contested. The British colonial authorities used the term *Depressed Classes*; *Scheduled Castes*, *Scheduled Tribes* and *Other Backward Classes* (OBC) are official terms used by the Indian government; Mahatma Gandhi used the term *Harijan* as a substitute for *Untouchables*; other terms include *Adi Dravida*, *Adi Karnataka*, and *Adi Andhr*. The term *Dalit* has become associated with social activism.

include Swami Dharma Theertha's *The Menace of Hindu Imperialism* (1941) and S. K. Biswas's *Autochthon of India and the Aryan Invasion* (1995).

L. N. Renu¹⁰ (1994:35), rejecting the Aryan invasion theory, saw it as a sub-conscious copy of the invasion of America and Australia by white settlers: "The Europeans failed to repeat the American-Australian experiment in India", and they subsequently added the Aryan race to the list of invaders drawing the presence of the term *Arya* in the Avesta and the Vedas, and *Dravida* in the Puranas (Renu, 1994:36: "This became the evidence for the existence of an Aryan race, with its home in Central Asia, which migrated to India, destroyed Dravidian forts, massacred local inhabitants and aryanised the land." Renu concludes (1994:37): "There was an Aryan cult. There was no Aryan race. This cult originated in India and grew on its soil." Aryan invasion theory is seen as reflecting a British divide-and-rule strategy, and Christianizing intentions, with its presence as academic orthodoxy reflecting continued Western dominance over Indian culture (Saraswati, 1996).

The invasion model was neatly inverted by Bhagwan S. Gidwani in his novel of speculative history, *Return of the Aryans*. Friese summarizes the novel as follows (2001:28):

Gidwani's potboiler follows a tribe of Aryans led by the heroic Bharata, who sally forth from their Indian homeland to civilize the West and then return – around 5000 BC. It's a mirror image of Max Müller, and fittingly Gidwani's Aryans are not white but dark.¹¹ Any major geographical name with "black" in it is attributed to their passage. [...] Their final triumph is – where else – the Black Forest. Here the quivering natives, "Germans (of blonde and gold hair) bowed to the Aryas in homage".¹²

Unfortunately for the British, the Aryans did not get as far as Britain, but later the impact of the Aryans was felt indirectly via the Germans: "The English were a mongrel race, outside the periphery of any civilized knowledge or culture at the time the Aryans travelled to Europe. Even for long centuries thereafter, a vast shadow of darkness and ignorance remained over Britain." Until it was civilized,

10. Renu describes himself as a member of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Educational Trust, founded in 1938 with Dr. K. M. Munshi, together with Mahatma Gandhi.

11. When the Aryas arrive in Germany they are greeted as other worldly beings by the natives (Gidwani, 1994: 882): 'What astounded them most was the dark skins, black hair and brown eyes of these people and they were certain that these strangers came not from the earth but from a different realm altogether. Their own world, they knew, was peopled by men with blond hair, blue eyes and fair skins [...]: According to Gidwani, the original skin colour of the Aryans was black, but intermarriage outside of India let to a lighter brown tone (1994: 885–6).

12. Gidwani (1994: 888).

“England was mired in superstition, filth, poverty, slavery, incest, homosexual activity, child-abuse, brigandage, human sacrifice, cannibalism, and the killing of old parents” (Gidwani, 1994: 937). An analogous inversion, in scholarly form, is found in Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena* (1987).

To complicate further this binary of the indigenous versus the colonial we should also add the impact of theosophical thinking. The Theosophist and anti-colonial activist Annie Besant (1847–1933) was elected president of the Indian National Congress in 1917 (Mortimer, 1983). The impact of Western “New Age” understandings of spirituality on India can be seen for example in Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920 *The Arctic Home in the Vedas* [1903]), where it was argued that the original Aryan homeland was in the Arctic, which they left around 8000 BC. One influence on Tilak was William Warren (1833–1929), who had argued that the cradle of humanity was the North Pole (1885).

One way to frame the entanglement of identity politics with narrative history is in terms of an epistemological clash between “outsider” academic historical linguistics and “insider” Hindu revivalist nationalism.

5. Outsider linguists versus insider understandings

An illustrative controversy from Thailand is that over the authenticity of the Ram Khamhaeng inscription, claimed to be a thirteenth century stele representing the origin of Thai script, and discovered in 1833 by the King Mongkut (Rama IV). The historian Michael Vickery argued forcefully, on philological-linguistic grounds, that this inscription was a fake, and that it had been produced much later than the thirteenth century, most likely in the nineteenth century (Vickery, 1991a, b). One key to the ensuing academic debate was that the authenticity of the inscription had been integrated into mainstream Thai narratives of their national history (see Chamberlain, 1991; Wongthes, 2003). Thai studies operate in part under the patronage of the Thai royal family, in particular Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn.

Such issues arise more generally when archaeologists, anthropologists, or linguists propose a particular historical trajectory for a group, in terms of migration or affiliation, which conflicts with that group’s own received understanding of their past or their identity. For example, the mapping of a linguistic area in terms of linguistic relationships, i.e. in respect of so-called genetic groupings of languages, imposes a scholarly grid quite foreign to the cultural-conceptual universe to which it referred. One example of this was Joseph Greenberg’s works of comparative typology of the African languages (1955) or his grouping of the languages of the Americas (1987). Whether one accepts Greenberg’s particular methodology

or not, any such system of distinctions, whether based on typological analysis or linguistic reconstruction, is intrinsically at odds with “insider” conceptualizations.

A controversy that raised complex insider/outsider issues was that over the status and educational role of Ebonics (African American Vernacular English), triggered by the Oakland School Board resolution of 1996.¹³ This resolution began with the assertion that

numerous validated scholarly studies demonstrate that African American students as part of their culture and history as African people possess and utilize a language described in various scholarly approaches as “Ebonics” [and] have also demonstrated that African Language Systems are genetically-based and not a dialect of English.¹⁴

One academic linguist accepted that Ebonics and standard English were “different language types” and that “while English is an Indo-European language, Ebonics is not” (Palacas, 2001: 337). By contrast, Baugh (2000: 85) argued that though “black scholars introduced the term ‘Ebonics’ with worthy social intentions, they did so by violating one of the most essential principles known to linguistic science”, namely that “one should never define a language or speech community based solely on the racial classification of its speakers”. Wright took this critique a step further, seeing the desire to distinguish Ebonics from English as driven by a separatist agenda. The School Board had failed to recognize sociolinguistic research “attesting to the structural connectedness of Ebonics to other varieties of American English”. This had to be viewed “as a political act, dictated by an ideological imperative to locate Ebonics outside of the macrolanguage system called English” (Wright, 1998: 13).

One general academic “outsider” trope is to point to modernity as not only breaking-down certain belief structures and conceptual systems, but also as facilitating their reconfiguration or “re-invention” as timeless and ancient. Debates about nationalism often display this “outsider” diagnostic trope, in the sense that claims made by nationalists for the antiquity and deep continuity of their nation are framed as constructs of nineteenth century ethnopolitics (Hobsbawm & Ranger, [1983] 2012; Gellner, [1983] 2006). Of course, the categories “outsider”

13. This brief discussion cannot do justice to the range of opinions expressed in this controversy (see Ramirez et al. 2005). The main point is that academic linguists were involved as experts in a matter of wide public concern and educational policy.

14. Resolution of the Board of Education Adopting the Report and Recommendations of the African American Task Force; A Policy Statement and Directing the Superintendent of Schools to Devise a Program to Improve the English Language Acquisition and Application Skills of African American Students, December 18, 1996, available at: jan.ucc.nau.edu/jmw22/1stOaklandRes.html.

and “insider” are themselves problematic and dependent on prior identification of the boundaries of relevant categories. So-called “insiders” in any case do not agree, and, in the case of the Aryan invasion hypothesis, there is a parallel set of views found both within India and outside it. Academic scholarship at certain moments may work to create or sustain such historical narratives, constructing lines of continuity between different historical periods, and formulating explicit models of collective identity in terms of culture or worldview. Yet it has equally the potential to contribute to the disenchantment of collective narratives, adding a layer of skeptical reflexivity to what now appear as insider “myths”, and undermining models of identity based on a primordial essence or original and definitive moment of national creation.

Linguistics is often presented as “a highly rigorous endeavor based on rational inquiry and empirical justification” (Pereltsvaig & Lewis, 2015:8). For Harris (1981:150–204), by contrast, it was linguistics itself that was in need of “demythologisation”. Sociocultural linguistics is likewise ambivalent about the paradigm of scientific objectivity and the reification of linguistic categories and structures, and is committed to validating certain insider understandings and “local” categories. Heller and McElhinny (2017:8) for example speak of the need to challenge “the distinction between expert and lay analysis”. If we follow the first view, then historical-comparative reconstruction provides a plausible foundation for knowledge and a buffer against purely ideologically motivated reconstructions of the Indian past. If we take the second, then we are left with a complex montage of incommensurables, with no way of imposing a coherent meta-narrative. This then leaves authority primarily in the hands of those who claim authentic ownership of the subject matter, including radical, fundamentalist or even racist voices.

Within a postmodern frame, this type of incompatibility or incommensurability between an insider set of myths and an outsider empirical (i.e. evidence-based) framework threatens to dissolve into an inconclusive relativism. One impact of Said’s work *Orientalism* (1978) was to stimulate critical rethinkings of institutionalized knowledge in the Western academy (Prashad, 2012:176–177), but it also empowered relativist counter-modern discourses and fundamentalist assertions of insider-ownership in relation to historical and cultural knowledge. The philosopher of science Meera Nanda has offered a wide-ranging critique of the impact of postmodernism on Indian intellectual and political debates, pointing to a convergence between postmodernist critiques of modern science and of Enlightenment universalism, the emergence of creation science in the United States, and the promotion of Vedic science, as part of Hindutva ideology, in India (Nanda, 2000, 2004, 2016). A further element of this process, according to Nanda, is that the – at first sight paradoxical – effect of globalization and neoliberalism has been to strengthen “a growing sense of Hindu majoritarianism”

and “popular Hinduism, expressed in a middle class neo-Vedantic religiosity” (2009: 2, 3, 5). On one level one can argue that the perceived leveling effects of economic globalization have triggered regionalist and particularist responses. But cultural globalization is in any case intrinsically much more complex, and carries with it North American identity politics, debates about science and objectivity, notions of respect for cultural difference, and principles of cultural ownership and authenticity. Put another way, a complex set of intellectual problems arise in relation to social constructionism as an epistemological stance. Social constructionism implies a rejection of essentialism, yet insider discourses are often highly essentialist. Or does insider essentialism under some conditions escape sceptical critique? This is the role of strategic essentialism or reification as proposed by the postcolonial critic, Gayatri Spivak (see Morris, 2010). But would Hindu fundamentalist nationalism qualify as “strategic”?

6. Concluding thoughts: A personal view

The question arises as to whether there is an objective linguistic fact of the matter determinable by an academic expert in relation to whether two language varieties are cognate or variants of the same underlying system and whether they can be traced back to a common ancestor and yield evidence about place of origin, migrations patterns, etc. For academic Indology and historical linguistics, there is a real scholarly debate to be identified beneath the layers of ideological contestation in the Aryan debates, even in relation to the homeland question (Bryant, 2001: 308). However the Aryan paradigm, with its assumptions about the evidentiary status of linguistic reconstruction, is itself open to sceptical objection, even from within the discipline. The Romance scholar Ernst Pulgram called any reconstructed language ‘something of a fiction’ (Pulgram, 1959). Absent non-linguistic evidence that the proto-language actually existed, ‘any *a priori* association of speakers with this fictitious tongue is absurd’. It was akin to ‘solving an equation in which both members are unknown’ (Pulgram, 1961: 20; Hutton, 2013).

My contention is that there never was an Aryan language, homeland, people, or race in any meaningful sense, and that the concept is a projection of late European assumptions about the relation between language and identity as they developed from the early modern period into the Romantic era. The massive scholarly and ideological edifice is built on a basic flaw in reasoning, namely that a set of correspondences between attested languages implies an original speech community (ethnic group, race, ...) with an identifiable homeland. This reflects a more basic assumption that an identifiable language implies a well-defined community, group, ethnicity, or race (the terminology varies with academic fashion), either

in the present or at some definitive point in the past.¹⁵ In this sense the basic principles and methods of Indo-European linguistics are fundamentally flawed, and, the erudition deployed there notwithstanding, its conclusions are in scholarly terms no more authoritative than the methods and typologies of racial theorists. The Indo-European paradigm depends on a search for earlier unities that can be reconstructed from perceived diversities. On those grounds alone, it can be categorized as a scholarly form of myth-making. No amount of evidence can settle a mythical question. There is a direct parallel with the search for the site of the lost city of Atlantis or the “lost land of Lemuria” (Ramaswamy, 2004). The homeland question is a particularistic variant of the search for the Garden of Eden. Max Müller used the term the “Aryan paradise” ([1888] 1912:127), and his writings form part of a literature which evoked an Aryan “Romantic utopia” (Figueira, 2002:72).

From this it follows that I agree with the argument, promoted primarily by right-wing Hindu nationalists, that Western linguistic theorizing created a rift or schism in the population of India.¹⁶ I arrive at this conclusion by a completely different route, however, since I do not accept the validity of any “genetic” distinctions drawn between language families. I regard this as yet another ill-conceived quasi-biological metaphor within the discipline of linguistics, reflecting as it does a characteristic hedging about whether it is languages or peoples that are being classified. Linguistics has constantly shifted responsibility for toxic political ideologies onto race theory (as if according to a slogan, “language good, race bad”), yet it was study of language that provided the conceptual architecture of modern understandings of diversity, especially for the emergent discipline of racial anthropology (Hutton, 2017). The Aryan Invasion Theory and the linguistic-ethnic distinction drawn between Aryan and Dravidian has had, arguably, much more damaging and long-lasting consequences for post-colonial India than the colonial-era introduction of racial anthropology.

Of course, the views stated here represent yet another layer of scholarly contestation, a very minor intervention from “outside” into the complex politics of knowledge of post-colonial India. My aim has been to illustrate the dilemmas of expertise for contemporary language studies, showing how problematic and

15. Leach (1964:48–49) talks of the ‘dogma’ that ‘those who speak a particular language form a unique definable unit, and that this unit group of people has always had a particular culture and a particular history’. This dogma however ‘does not relate to facts on the ground’, given intermarriage and language shift. Yet Leach himself surmised, in relation to the ‘Jingpaw, Maru, Nung, Lisu and Tai’ groups who live ‘jumbled up’, that there ‘must have been a time in the past when these language groups were territorially separate’.

16. This is not to say that I accept the conclusions about history and identity drawn by proponents of Hindutva ideology; nor do I believe linguistic analysis involved a conscious divide-and-rule strategy.

contentious postcolonial politics of knowledge have become. I recognize that my views on the Indian case can be rejected out of hand, given my positioning and lack of relevant specialist academic background. I would argue nonetheless that there remains an important role for outsider commentators, not least because of the family resemblances between the Indian case and those of other postcolonial states. *Aryan* is both a mainstream category of modern scholarly history and its most toxic, and it requires analysis and interpretation at a transnational level. The clash between, to put the matter crudely, outsider scholars and insider ideologues is vexed in the extreme (Witzel, 2005). Questions about ownership, authenticity, the nature and location of interpretative authority, bring together all the tensions and pressures of postcolonial knowledge production. The Aryan story is one with no evident beginning, given the contentious nature both of the history and the historiography. It is a hall of mirrors with no identifiable referent. This makes the Aryan question in all its ramifications a matter of enduring interest and importance.

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