

SOME REFLECTIONS ON DRAVIDIANS AND ARYANS

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Dr. Basham is widely known as a historian of South East Asia. He affirms that language of Harappan civilization belongs to Dravidian group. His observation on the unity of India is thought provoking.

I have been asked to talk on this theme because of its great topical interest, and I have only agreed with some misgiving, for I am no specialist in modern history or contemporary Indian affairs. I have absolutely no qualifications to discuss the pros and cons of recent manifestations of Tamil nationalism, and the best I can do, as a historian specializing in the early period of the history of the South-Asian Subcontinent, is to discuss some aspects of early and medieval Indian history which may be of interest to students of the problem.

I must first of all state my presuppositions. I do not believe that history repeats itself. Every historical situation is unique; hence I will make no attempt to forecast what will happen in South India, and will not give gratuitous advice to Indian politicians, whether Tamils or Aryans. All I aim at doing is to satisfy the intellectual curiosity of my audience by pointing out some of the remoter factors which have led up to the present situation.

At the outset we must be quite sure what we mean when we talk of Aryans and Dravidians. In an Indian context the term Aryan was *originally* the

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name of a group of kindred peoples who entered India in the middle of the second millennium. B.C., and some of whom composed the hymns of the *Rg Veda*. In those days the word was more or less racial in connotation. Later the term came to mean a person who was accepted as a better-class follower of the Dharma of class and *asrama* (*varanasramadharmā*) associated with early Hinduism—a man of the *brahman*, *ksatriya* or *vaisya* order who had undergone the ceremony of *upanayana* (initiation with the sacred thread) – and in one text at least, the Kautliya *Arthasatra* (iii, 13,) it explicitly includes the better type of *sudra*. The Buddhists used the term *Arya* with a wide connotation, and in their texts it often seems to mean merely 'noble' or 'excellent', as in the *cattaari ariyasaccaani*, the 'Four Noble Truths'. Thus according to the usage of more than two thousand years, the Tamil Brahman is strictly speaking an Aryan, and the common Tamil honorific *Aiyar*, added to so many proper names, is in fact derived ultimately from the Sanskrit *Arya*.

In ancient days there was a vaguely defined region of South India known in the North as *Dravida*, probably a corruption of the word *Tamil*. This word was applied by the nineteenth century philologist Caldwell to a group of languages spoken mainly in the peninsula – its four chief tongues being *Tamil*, *Telugu*, *Kannada* and *Malayalam*. The ethnologist *Risley* borrowed the term and applied it to a certain ethnic type, which he found in many parts of India, but in highest concentration in the Peninsula. Later ethnologists and anthropologists do not normally use the term in learned publications. In fact in scientific usage there is no *Dravidian* race and no *Aryan* race, but the two terms are used only in linguistic or perhaps cultural contexts. Politicians may attach other senses to them, but in doing so they have no good scientific basis.

According to the classification most popular with contemporary ethnologists the majority of the inhabitants of the *Dravidian*-speaking parts of India are *Proto-Australoid*, *Palaeo-Dravidian*, or a mixture of the two. The most widely held theory is that the *Proto-Australoid* type, found at its purest in certain tribal peoples, is indigenous, while the *Palaeo-Mediterranean* came from outside. Similar but not identical types are found all over India, with a greater admixture of *Indo-Aryan* the further north one goes, and with various other elements here and there, such as *Mongoloid* and *Armeno-Alpine*. There is no sharp division from the point of view of ethnology between the speakers of *Dravidian* languages and those of *Indo-Aryan* ones; it is possible to draw a fairly accurate line on a map of India, dividing the regions with a majority of *Dravidian*

speakers from the rest of the sub-continent. Nothing similar can be done in the case of Proto-Australoid or Palaeo-Mediterranean racial types.

Nevertheless, the fact that there is a group of kindred languages called Dravidian suggests that at some prehistoric time a common Proto-Dravidian language was spoken, and from this, all later Dravidian languages developed. The present distribution of Dravidian languages may permit some sort of hypothesis as to the origin of the speakers of this vanished tongue.

It is well known that the four major literate Dravidian languages are not the only ones. There are important Dravidian tribal languages in Central India, notably various dialects of Gondi, and a Dravidian language, Malto, is even spoken by a few thousand tribal people in Southwest Bengal. Most surprising of all in Brahui, a Dravidian language spoken in the far northwestern corner of the Subcontinent, in the region of Kelat. The speakers of this language, incidentally, show no Dravidian ethnic features whatever, and are not easily distinguishable from the other peoples of the region. These tribal Dravidian languages preserve more archaic forms than the literary Dravidian languages of South India. The earliest Dravidian literature that we know, the Tamil Sangam Poems of the early Christian centuries, shows much later forms than do modern Brahui or Gondi.

Further evidence may be derived from certain peculiar characteristics of Sanskrit. A feature of the Indo-Aryan languages which sharply divides them from other languages of the Indo-European family is the presence in them of a series of consonantal sounds generally known as 'retroflex' or 'cerebral' in English, and as *murdhanya* in Sanskrit. The difference between the 't' sounds in the Hindi words 'ata' meaning 'coming' and meaning 'ata' 'flour' is a typical illustration. To the Indian these two words sound quite different, while to the untrained westerner they are virtually alike and he may only learn to recognize the difference after years of training. The distinction between the two groups of consonants occurs in the earliest Sanskrit literature we know, the *Rg Veda*, and it is at the same time a characteristic feature of the Dravidian languages; these pullulate with retroflex sounds, which are far more common in Dravidian than in Indo-Aryan languages. *Philologists have also shown that many common words in Sanskrit have been borrowed from Dravidian sources.*

The obvious explanation of these linguistic phenomena is that soon after the Aryan's entry into India they met Dravidian speakers in large numbers and intermarried with them. This, and the presence of the Brahui language in

Baluchistan, strongly suggests that there were many Dravidian speakers in the Northwest of the Subcontinent about 1500 B.C. It seems to me to be probable, though, of course, far from certain, that the people of the Harappa Culture spoke a Dravidian language. In support of this theory, South Indian scholars, aided by the late Professor Heras of Bombay, have found very numerous points of resemblances between the ancient culture of the Indus and that of later Dravidian – speaking India. Many of these imagined resemblances are quite fantastic, and many more are doubtful in the extreme. There have been too many efforts at explaining the Harappa Culture on the basis of later India. One student at least fails to find four or three-headed Sivas, ascetics in meditation and temple prostitutes, let alone Jain *Tirthankaras*, in the remains of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. Certain features of Harappa religion, however, are fairly clear – for instance ritual bathing, phallic worship, the Mother Goddess and the sacred bull. But these are not particularly or essentially South Indian, and though they do point to continuity with later times they do not point to a special continuity with southern India, except perhaps in the case of the great artificial bathing tank at Mohenjo-daro. Such tanks seem far more frequently to be found in the temple complexes of the South than in the North.

The recent discovery of a considerable Harappan port at Lothal opens up many possibilities. Here Harappan culture did not suddenly disappear, as it did in the Indus cities, but merged with intrusive cultures and went through a slow process of change and development, to become part of the general cultural pattern of classical India. Can it be that the Harappa people slowly carried their culture and language down the coast, altering and perhaps to some extent degenerating as they went, then crossed the Coimbatore Gap and finally settled in the plain of the Kaveri? This is a very tempting hypothesis, but it has difficulties, for it does not explain the presence of the Gondi and Malto languages far to the East of India. If we are to bring them into the picture we must postulate a much earlier penetration of Dravidian – speaking peoples into Central India-peoples who either had not acquired the high civilization of the Indus or had much degenerated from it.

Moreover the hypothesis that the Harappa people were early Dravidian-speakers who later travelled down the west coast and settled in South India involves an ethnological crux. The cranial evidence from the Harappan cities does not quite agree with that of modern south India. Both show proto-Australoid and dolichocephalic elements, but the Harappan dolichocephalic type

is somewhat different from that of South India, for the latter is characterized as Palaeo-Mediterranean while the former is Mediterranean without qualification. The latter type, with somewhat more developed features and a firmer jaw, exists in the Northern parts of the Subcontinent and in Sind at the present day.

In fact there is little that we can say with certainty, or with anything approaching certainty, about the prehistory of the Dravidian-speakers. The evidence at present available, however suggests that their ancestors entered India by way of the Northwest at a very early period, long before the Aryans, though there are scholars who, on the basis of early South Indian pottery and other evidence, believe that they came by sea from South Arabia. At one time they must have covered a wide area of the Northwest and Central India, if not the Ganga plain. Anything more that we say of them is in the nature of exciting speculation, and carries no real conviction, though further archaeological discovery may soon throw more light on the subject.

Historically the three Tamil kingdoms appear together for the first time in the 3rd century B.C. in the inscriptions of Asoka, who claims to have won his 'victories of Dhamma' over the Colas, Pandyas and Keralas, among the other peoples on his frontiers. It seems likely that the three kingdoms were by now in their traditional locations, and the context in which they are mentioned shows that they were already receiving elements of Aryan culture, whether Hindu or Buddhist. The Jains were by this time finding their way to the South also. There is a strong tradition of a migration of Jain monks to Sravana Belgola in the early 3rd century, taking the ex-emperor Candragupta Maurya with them, and some of the early cave inscriptions in South India suggest the presence of Jain *munis*.

The earliest literature of the Tamils perhaps dates from the 1st or 2nd century A.D. Some indigenous scholars would like to put it earlier and some would put it later, but, by the same rough system of stratification as that by which Vedic literature is dated, the earliest parts of the *Purananuru* and *Agananuru* can hardly be later than 200 A.D. and are probably earlier. The culture reflected in these texts is one in which Arayanization has already made some progress. The redactors of the *Mahabharata*, who were working at about the same time, included Colas, Keralas and Pandyas among the participants in the great battle of Kuruksetra. Similarly the panegyrist of the Tamil land praised kings whose ancestors were believed to have taken part in the same war. This fact shows that assimilation had begun from both sides. The brahmins are

already in evidence, tending their sacred fires and performing Vedic sacrifices at the behest of some of the Tamil kings. The native Tamil gods are in the process of assimilating themselves with Northern deities. The *velan*, the shamanistic priest of the god Murugan, still leads the congregation in wild ritual dances and offers to the god balls of rice soaked in goat's blood, but Murugan is already referred to as six-faced, and given other attributes of the Northern Skanda, while the great gods of Hinduism are already present. The language of the '*Eight Anthologies*' already contains numerous Sanskrit loan-words, though not as many as in later times. Thus, at the earliest period for which we have detailed information, the Tamils were already entering the general Aryan cultural framework. Even at this time, the local and regional element in Tamil culture was probably little stronger than in later Bengal, for instance, with its own special devotional literature in honour of deities of local origin, who are hardly known beyond its borders.

The later history of the relations of Dravidian and Aryan speakers is one of increasingly closer cultural influence. I know of no evidence of mutual antipathy, or of a consciousness of any great difference between Northerner and Southerner. There were occasional incursions from the North; for instance a very ancient Tamil tradition tells of a fierce attack by the 'base Mauryas' which reached the Hill of Podiyil, far in the south of the Tamil land. On the other hand the semi-legendary Cola king Karikalan is said to have performed a *digvijaya* in the course of which he planted his tiger-flag in the Himalayas.

In the medieval period the Peninsula had two main seats of power, the Tamil country and the Western Deccan, and with some variation this political pattern continued for many centuries, with frequent warfare between the two regions. The Tamils were ruled first by the Pallavas, then by the imperial Colas, and then by the Pandyas; the Deccan was successively in the power of the Calukyas, the Rastrakutas, the revived Calukyas, and the Hoysalas; the history of the South is largely one of warfare between one region and the other. But here there was no question of an instinctive feud between Dravidian and Aryan, for the official language of the Deccan powers was in the main Kannada, and thus both sides were Dravidian-speakers.

If there was any political tension between Aryan and Dravidian-speakers it occurred only in the Deccan. There were numerous raids from the Deccan on the North, notably from the Rastrakutas, who were particularly energetic in this

respect, and attacks by the Northern powers on the Deccan took place from time to time. But, as far as can be seen, these were part of the general pattern of medieval Indian warfare, and were never looked on as a struggle between Aryan and Dravidian. If the Southerners developed their own particular styles of temple architecture the same is true of other regions on India. If medieval Tamil literature has special features of its own, the same is true of the other languages of India. When the Dravidian-speaking areas became thoroughly permeated with Aryan culture they developed this culture in their own way and played a more than equal part in the intellectual and spiritual life of medieval India, with a succession of learned philosophers and religious teachers from Sankara onwards, many of whom travelled widely in the North and seem to have been universally accepted there as genuine Aryan brahmans.

Thus there was no strong sense of polarity either in the world of politics or in that of religion between Dravidian-speaker and Indo-Aryan-speaker, between North and South. Each recognized the other as a member of the Aryan community, and as an inhabitant of the great culture-region known as Bharatavarsa. This is not to say that there were not differences or that these differences were not recognized. But the distinctions between North and South in matters of language, religion, polity and social structure were no thought of as any more fundamental than those between other regions of India. I believe that the idea of the Tamils as a separate people, or of the Dravidian-speakers generally as a separate people, sharply divided from the other peoples of India, is of modern growth and owes much more to twentieth century nationalism than to anything in Tamil or Dravidian tradition. If the Tamils are to be looked on as a separate people, then from the point of view of history and tradition the same must be said of all the main linguistic groups of Indian.

But the contemporary problem of the relations of Tamil and non-Tamil cannot be solved merely by an appeal to history. Historical myths quickly develop among rapidly developing peoples, and, if they serve the purpose of national solidarity, they are not easily shaken. One such myth is that India has only been happy and prosperous when the major part of the Subcontinent has been united under a single government of a centralizing and rather authoritarian type, such as the Mauryas, the Guptas, the Mughals and the British Raj. This myth was sedulously propagated by the historian who at the beginning of this century had the greatest influence on historical thinking about India, whether by Indian or Westerner; and Vincent Smith made no attempt to conceal the moral

which he drew from his history in favour of the particular centralizing authoritarian government which happened to be ruling at the time. He called Chandragupta Maurya, Asoka and Akbar to witness to the blessings of such a regime, and made much of the traditions of the *digvijayin* and the *cakravartin* as evidence of the eternal desire of India for political unity, a desire which has only been fulfilled in the British Raj. The same ideas have been taken up by nationalist historians, who have drawn a diametrically opposite morel from them, and it now seems generally taken for granted that the political unity of India is essentially a good thing.

It is not for me as a historian to decide whether at this juncture in her history the political unity of India is a good thing or bad one. But as I see it, as far as the whole history of India is concerned, the proposition that India is only happy and prosperous when controlled by a single government is untrue, or at least unproven. We have no clear evidence to show that the Western Deccan was happier under Asoka than it later became under the Satavahanas, or that Bengal was happier under Akbar than it had been under Husain Shah. In the past the whole genius of Indian civilization has favoured a wide diversity, political, social and cultural, within the broad framework of the eternal Aryan Dharma, liberally interpreted, which prevailed throughout the Subcontinent. And at most periods India has flourished and developed in that diversity.

Asoka, with his *dharma-mahamattas* going out from Pataliputra and touring all the provinces to ensure that throughout the empire the fishermen ceased to fish and the hunters to hunt, was an exceptional case. Even the *Arthashastra*, the most centralizing in tendency of all Indian texts on politics, deprecates social or political uniformity. When a king conquers or annexes another country he should respect and maintain the customs of that country, and when he visits it he should speak its language and wear the local costume(xiii, 5). The *digvijayins* and *cakravartins* of legend are in no way comparable to Asoka, much less to Queen Victoria or to Jawaharlal Nehru, and they give absolutely no support to the policy of bureaucratic centralized control of the whole of India. The ideal *digvijayin* goes out at the head of his troops and in fair and chivalrous fight, respecting the lives of captives and non-combatants, he conquers all the other kings of India. He has no high political purpose in doing so, but merely a personal one, the desire to add to his own glory and spiritual merit. He accepts the homage and tribute of the kings whom he conquers and they remain on their respective thrones. As long as they are more or less just and loyal they govern

much as they did before, but he is now their overlord. If they quarrel among themselves he is now the arbiter of the whole of India, and they come to him for judgement.

This was the ideal of Hindu India, and neither the British Raj nor Congress has come anywhere near fulfilling it, though it is just possible that the East India Company might have done so, had it not been for a succession of utilitarian governor generals who cared little or nothing for tradition and annexed principalities right and left.

Translated into twentieth century terms, the ideal of Hindu India would amount to a federation of internally independent states, with the centre responsible for little else than foreign affairs and the settlement of disputes between members. But such a loosely-knit India is probably not workable in the present situation. Something rather like it was suggested by the Cabinet Mission just after the Second World War, as a possible compromise between Hindu and Muslim, but the idea came to nothing. It is hardly likely that it will come to anything now.

So I can give no advice on what ought to be done, nor can I forecast what will happen as a result of the growing nationalism and separatism in the Tamil-speaking area of India. The movement has no precedent in the history of India, and neither, for that matter, has the present Indian government. Viewed in the perspective of over two thousand years of history the problem is a completely novel one, and it is for the politicians and the people who elect them, rather than the historians, to provide its solution.
