

Some Observations on the Aryan Issue

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Introduction

Mythology is an interesting area for research which deals with the socio-cultural studies of ancient civilizations. Studying some myths helps to know the political background of the ancient world. Thus Mythology not only is the study of myths but it also deals with the reflection of reality behind them. In the context of the Vedic concept of Aryan there is also many opinions among scholars regarding their identity. It is believed that Vedas of India are the creation of the people named Aryans. Scholars are of different opinion regarding this matter. Some scholars opine that Aryans were indigenous people and some others are of opinion that they were invaders. Some scholars consider Aryans are belonged to certain race. This paper tries to analyze some observations on the Aryan issue.

Vedic Aryans

The term Aryan can be traced back in Vedas. Scholars are of opinion that Vedic culture is of the Aryans the people who invaded to India from central Asia. Vedas are believed to be the praises to the Aryan gods/leaders. Vedic hymns reflect the social life of Aryans and also their enemies. the enemies of Aryans are generally called by the name Anaryans i.e. non-Aryans.

Aryan and non-Aryan Tribes

Rgvedic hymns profusely refer to Aryan and non-Aryan (Anârya) people. Scholars widely accept that the people who

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composed Vedas belonged to the Aryan clan. It has already been discussed in the previous section that Aryan is admitted here not as a race but as a culture. In *Zgveda* the term 'ârya' occurs in 36 contexts.¹ Reference to the people who are identified as the enemies of Vedic people such as Dâsas, Dasyus, Asuras, Râkcasas, PaGis etc. are found hundreds of different contexts in Rgvedic hymns. The common nature of the concept of the references to the above noted people in *Zgveda* is the rivalry towards them by the Vedic people. It noticeably reflects the religious schisms in the ancient Indian social structure.

Different Theories on Aryan Issue

Aryan is a Sanskrit word means 'noble' or 'pure'. David Frawley² opines that this positive sense is the reason behind its usage in Vedic literature. Thus the people with high minds and good hearts, spiritual values etc. are considered to be belonging to Aryan clan. It is thought to be a culture based upon the rule of the seers and men of spiritual realization. Thus a person of any spiritual culture is Ârya and that of any non-spiritual culture is Anârya. In the context of Buddhism Buddha used the term 'ârya' along with Dharma, i.e. Ârya-Dharma. It suggests certainly that there was no racial connotation for the term Ârya in the time of Buddha.³

Scholars like John Garret⁴ admit Aryan as a race. It has two branches, an eastern and a western. Eastern branch comprehends the inhabitants of Armenia, Persia, Afghanistan and Hindustan. Western branch consists of the inhabitants of Europe except Turks, Magyars and Finns.

The Encyclopedia Britannica defines Aryans as a people, who in pre-historic times settled in Iran and northern India. It is from the language Aryan the Indo-European languages of South Asia are said to have descended. In the 19th century the term was used as a synonym for Indo-European and also more restrictively to refer to Indo-European languages.⁵

Benjamin Walker considers Aryan as a family of people known as Indo-Europeans. According to him the word 'ârya' means 'noble'. Aryans came from the steppes of Russia and central Asia at about 2000 BCE. One group branched into Europe to become the ancestors of Greeks and another spread through Asia Minor to Iran.⁶

Scholars like V. Nagarajan⁷ think that Aryans were not invaders or aliens but were the original inhabitants of the Indo-Gangetic plains and were mainly peasants. They were a class not a race. There are no archeological or literary evidence to prove that they were invaders. Indus Valley Civilization according to him was a part of Vedic civilization and it survived the Sarasvatî basin civilization.

Famous linguist M.A. Mehandale⁸ analyzing the word Aryan seen in the compound Indo-Aryan observes that Indo-Aryan is a specific group of languages spoken in a large part of ancient India as distinguished from Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, where other languages of the Indo-European family are spoken. Mehandale thinks that 'Ârya' does not mean the speaker of these languages belonging to a particular race called 'Ârya'. It is a well known fact that the speakers of these languages today represent an admixture of races. The speakers who belonged to this language family in ancient India called themselves 'Ârya'. This may be the reason for designating the language as 'Indo-Aryan'.

Some others like Bhupendranath Dutta,⁹ hold the view that the Vedic Aryans did not belong to a particular biotype. In the homeland of Indo-Aryan there existed diverse biotypes from remote antiquity. According to him, Ârya in the Vedic age had been the cultural name of the Indo-European language speaking people in India. They belonged to a cultural ethnic group, and not to a race for there is no substantive proof for such a homogenous racial group.

According to R.N. Sharma after the coming of Dravidians, Aryans arrived at India. He has pointed out that Aryans married Dravidian women because of the low population ratio of women among them. Even if Aryans were not interested in worshipping *ĒivaliĒga*, their Dravidian wives brought it into the Aryan society. Due to the influence of Dravidians the number of Aryan gods increased, and the practices of worshipping of plants and trees like tulsi, pipal, banyan etc. have crept into the Aryan pantheon.¹⁰

Aryan is not a Race

From the above discussions regarding the Aryan problem it is clear that Aryan is not a race but a culture. Romila Thapar¹¹ thinks that the Indus cities had declined by the time of mid 2nd millennium BCE which affected the economic and administrative systems and resulted in rural settlement. Probably around this period the Indo-Aryan speakers entered the north-west part of India from Indo-Iranian borderlands. They were migrating in small numbers through the passes in the north-western mountains and settled in northern parts of India. The frequent small scale migrations may have followed earlier pastoral circuits. The migrations may mainly have happened in search of pastures and arable land for keeping their cattle wealth. The textual sources suggest that the initial settlement were in the north-west parts and the plains of Punjab. Later, some groups moved to the Indo-Gangetic areas. Myths seen in *Zend Avesta*, point toward to this frequent migration from Iran to Indus area. This clearly is an indication of the need of land felt in the society due to the increase in human and animal numbers. The language used in Vedas which has close affinity with the central Asian Indo-European, particularly Old Iranian, supports the migration of some foreigners to India. The life of foreigners, who were having a different language, culture, religious beliefs etc. from that of the aboriginals is obviously reflected in Rgvedic hymns also.

Consequently, there may have happened some conflicts and collaborations in between the foreigners and the aboriginals. Thus, it may reasonably be stated that these conflicts and interactions in ancient Indian society caused to the emergence of a dominant mixed culture which later came to be identified as Aryan culture. It has already been noted earlier that the word 'Aryan' literally meant 'noble'. Thus the new culture that gained domination in the society gradually was identified as a noble culture. The people who followed this culture called themselves Aryans and who do not pursue them came to be called as non-Aryans. Obviously, there were many different sects in India during that period who could not have been absorbed into the Aryan culture. Vedic Literature calls them by the names Dâsas, Dasyus, Asuras, Râkcasas, PaGis etc. Consequently, the language spoken by Aryans attained highest position in the society.

From the above discussions it is very clear that Aryan is not a race but a culture. As the etymology of the word indicates the Aryan means noble. Thus the people who have a dominated culture in the society called themselves Aryans. Their culture became identified as Aryan culture. Their language Sanskrit is the Aryan language i.e. noble language. Everything that is related with Aryans became noble. Who oppose their culture became understood by them as Anaryas i.e. non-Aryans. Their abuses towards their enemies reflect in the Vedic hymns. The non-Aryan Dasyus were regarded in *Zgveda* as 'akarman'¹² (riteless), 'adevyu'¹³ (indifferent to the gods), 'abrahman'¹⁴ (without devotion), 'ayajvan'¹⁵ (non-sacrificing), 'avrata'¹⁶ (lawless), 'm[dhra-vâc'¹⁷ (unintelligible or hostile speaker) and 'œiœna-deva'¹⁸ (worshippers of a phallus deity).

Conclusion

The people who are mentioned under the group of Aryan and Non-Aryan apparently are the followers of two different

cultures. This is the criteria of scholars in classifying them into separate groups. The division of Vedic people into Aryan and non-Aryan is still a matter of dispute. Vedic hymns clearly attest to the existence of different cultured people. However, the difference is thought to be cultural and not racial. The details regarding the enemies of the Vedic people who inherited a different life and culture is few in Vedas. But, there are references within the Vedic texts which give valuable information regarding the cultural as well as religious differences among them. More researches are to be done regarding the Aryan issue for the better understanding of India's ancient past.

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13. *Zgveda, VIII.70.11.*

14. *Zgveda, IV.16.9.*

15. *Zgveda, VIII.70.11.*

16. *Zgveda, I.51.8; I.175.3.*

17. *Zgveda, V.29.10.*

18. *Zgveda, VII.21.5; X.99.3.*