

Hindutva and history

Why do Hindutva ideologues keep flogging a dead horse?

ROMILA THAPAR

“THE Aryans” became a historical category in the late nineteenth century. There was much confusion between “Aryan” as race and as language, a confusion that has not entirely cleared in popular perception. In its application to Indian history, it was argued that the *aryas* referred to in the Rigveda were the Aryans who had invaded and conquered northern India, founded Indian civilisation, and spread their Indo-Aryan language. The theory had an immediate impact, particularly on those with a political agenda and on historians.

Jyotiba Phule maintained that the Aryan invasion explained the arrival of alien brahmins and their dominance and oppression of the lower castes. The invasion was necessary to this view of history. For those concerned with a Hindutva ideology, the invasion had to be denied. The definition of a Hindu as given by Savarkar was that India had to be his *pitribhumi* (ancestral land) and his *punyabhumi* (the land of his religion). A Hindu therefore could not be descended from alien invaders. Since Hindus sought a lineal descent from the Aryans, and a cultural heritage, the Aryans had to be indigenous. This definition of the Hindu excluded Muslims and Christians from being indigenous since their religion did not originate in India.

Historians initially accepted the invasion theory and some even argued that the decline of the Indus cities was due to the invasion of the Aryans, although the archaeological evidence for this was being discounted. But the invasion theory came to be discarded in favour of alternative theories of how the language,

Frontline invited Romila Thapar, the eminent historian of ancient India, to provide a perspective on the Cover feature.

Indo-Aryan, entered the sub-continent. In 1968, I had argued at a session of the Indian History Congress that invasion was untenable and that the language – Indo-Aryan – had come with a series of migrations and therefore involving multiple avenues of the acculturation of peoples. The historically relevant question

was not the identity of the Aryans (identities are never permanent) but why and how languages and cultures change in a given area.

Why then do Hindutva ideologues – Indian and non-Indian – keep flogging a dead horse and refuse to consider the more recent alternative theories? For them the only alternative is that if the Aryans were not invaders, they must have been indigenous. That there is a range of possibilities between the two extremes of invaders or indigenes does not interest them. The insistence on the indigenous origin of the Aryans allows them to maintain that the present-day Hindus are the lineal descendants of the Aryans and the inheritors of the land since the beginning of history. This then requires that the presence of the Aryans be taken back into

earliest history. Hence the attempt to prove, against the prevailing evidence from linguistics and archaeology, that the authors of the Rigveda were the people of the Indus cities or were possibly even prior to that.

The equation is based on identifying words from the Rigveda with objects from the Indus cities. That the village-based, pastoral society of the Rigveda could not be identical with the complex urban society of the Indus cities is not conceded. Yet there are no descriptions of the city in the Rigveda or even the later Vedic corpus, that could be applied to the Indus cities: no references to structures built on platforms, or the grid pattern of streets and the careful construction of drainage systems, to granaries, warehouses and areas of intensive craft production, to seals and their function, and to the names of the places where goods were sent. If the two societies were identical, the two systems would at least have to be similar.

In order to prove that the Indus civilisation was Aryan, the language has to be deciphered as a form of Sanskrit and there has to be evidence of an Aryan presence, which currently is being associated with



Potsherd with incised triple-trident sign found in early levels at Harappa and dating sometime between 3500 and 2800 BCE.



Pottery from a grave at Harappa.



Small terracotta tablet from Harappa depicting part of a mythological scene. Combat between human and animal or animal and animal is often depicted.

the horse and the chariot. Attempts to decipher the language have so far not succeeded and those reading it as Sanskrit have been equally unsuccessful. But there are linguistic rules that have to be observed in any decipherment. These make it necessary for a claim to stand the test of linguistic analyses. The readings also have to show some contextual consistency. These have been demonstrated as lacking in the decipherment claimed by Rajaram and Jha.

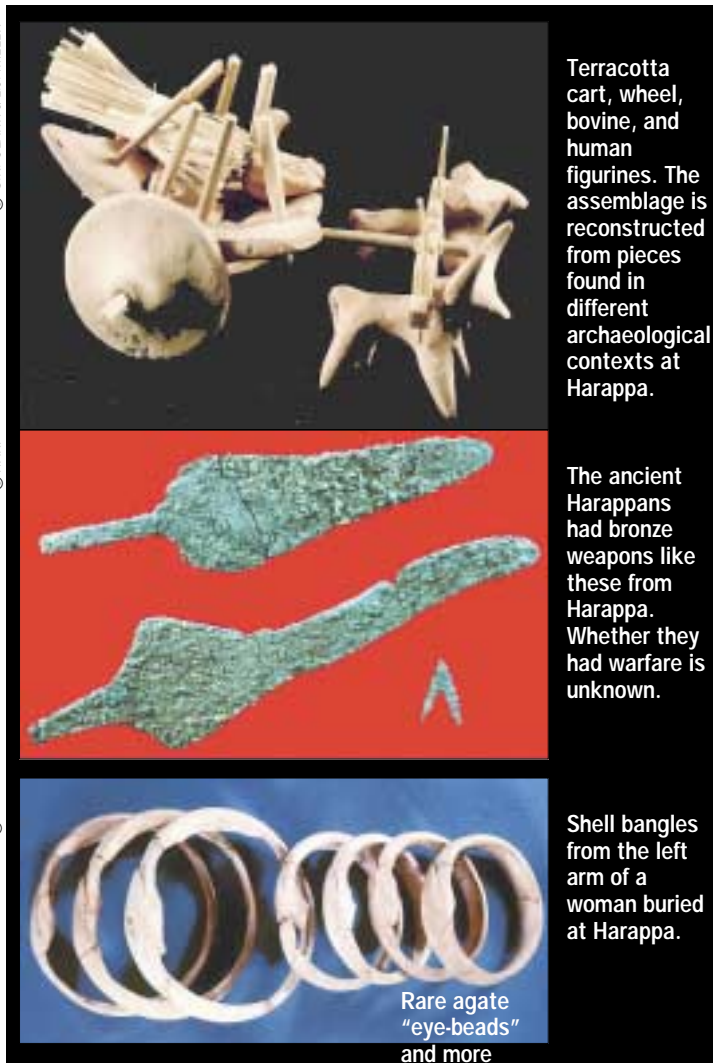
To insist that a particular seal represents the horse as Rajaram does, was an attempt to foreclose the argument and maintain that the horse was important to the Indus civilisation, therefore it was an Aryan civilisation. Quite apart from the changes made in the computer enhanced image of the seal to give the impression of a horse, which have been discussed in the article by Witzel and Farmer,

the animal in the photograph of the seal is clearly not a horse. Furthermore, if the horse had been as central to the Indus civilisation as it was to the Vedic corpus, there would have been many seals depicting horses. But the largest number of seals are those which depict the bull unicorn.

Indian history from the perspective of the Hindutva ideology reintroduces ideas that have long been discarded and are of little relevance to an understanding of the past. The way in which information is put together, and generalisations drawn from this, do not stand the test of analyses as used in the contemporary study of history. The rewriting of history according to these ideas is not to illumine the past but to allow an easier legitimization from the past for the political requirements of the present. The Hindutva obsession with identity is not a problem related to the early history of India but arises out of an attempt to manipulate identities in con-

temporary politics. Yet ironically, this can only be done if the existing interpretations of history are revised and forced into the Hindutva ideological mould. To go by present indications, this would imply a history based on dogma with formulaic answers, mono-causal explanations, and no intellectual explorations. Dogmatic assertions with no space for alternative ideas often arise from a sense of inferiority and the fear of debate. Hence the determination to prevent the publication of volumes on

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Terracotta cart, wheel, bovine, and human figurines. The assemblage is reconstructed from pieces found in different archaeological contexts at Harappa.

The ancient Harappans had bronze weapons like these from Harappa. Whether they had warfare is unknown.

Shell bangles from the left arm of a woman buried at Harappa.

history which do not conform to Hindutva ideology.

History as projected by Hindutva ideologues, which is being introduced to children through textbooks and is being thrust upon research institutes, precludes an open discussion of evidence and interpretation. Nor does it bear any trace of the new methods of historical analyses now being used in centres of historical research. Such history is dismissed by the Hindutva ideologues as Western, imperialist, Marxist, or whatever, but they are themselves unaware of what these labels mean or the nature of these readings. There is no recognition of the technical training required of historians and archaeologists or of the foundations of social science essential to historical explanation. Engineers, computer experts, journalists-turned-politicians, foreign journalists posing as scholars of Indology, and what have you, assume infallibility, and pronounce on archaeology and history. And the media accord them the status.

The article by Witzel and Farmer is a serious critique of the claims that have been made by Rajaram and Jha about the Aryan identity of the Indus civilisation and the decipherment of the Harappan script. The critique was first put out on the Internet but those who have access to the Internet in India are still a limited few. It is important for this article to be published, for it is a salutary lesson for the media to be more cautious in unfamiliar areas and not rush to publicise anything that sounds sensational. It is also necessary that the debate be made accessible to the reading public so that people are not repeatedly taken for a ride. It shows up the defective library resources in India that would need to be radically improved if research in early Indian history is to be made more effective. But above all, the article demonstrates the lengths to which historical sources can be manipulated by those supporting the claims of Hindutva ideology. ■