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## The Aryans and the Ancient System of Caste

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***Abstract:** Over the last century or two, the dominant accounts of the caste system have looked for its roots in the ancient history of India. More precisely scholars have linked the origin of the caste system to the invasion of a Sanskrit speaking people, the Aryans, who are said to have imposed their language, religion and social structure on an indigenous population called the Dravidians. In this account, the latter were subjugated by the Aryans and made to have an inferior place in society as the lowest caste. Given the importance of the Aryan invasion theory in our understanding of the caste system this article looks into the literature on how this invasion and subjugation actually took place and what evidence is available for it. This analysis leads to the conclusion that hardly any or no evidence exists for the claim that the caste system originated as the result of an Aryan invasion. Subsequently, the article looks into the development of this account in the early nineteenth century European literature in order to see on what this account was based and to identify the background assumptions that make it appear plausible till today.*

***Key words:** Aryan invasion – caste system – Aryans – Dravidians – inferiority – nation*

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Over the last century or two, the dominant accounts of the caste system have looked for its roots in the ancient history of India. The story told about the rise of this social system begins in the era when an alien people called the Aryans is supposed to have invaded the Subcontinent. The standard version of this history tells us that a people called ‘the Aryans’ invaded India around 1500 BC, conquered the indigenous Dravidians and imposed their culture, language and religion on the latter. They are said to have brought the Vedic religion, which later developed into Hinduism and to have instituted the religiously founded caste system. In this account the idea of the caste system as an intrinsic part of Hinduism was not only reinforced, the idea of an institutionalized form of discrimination along racial lines was also added to it. The account about the Aryan invasion originated in the nineteenth century European descriptions of India and has generally been accepted as a fact about India for the last

200 years. Even though this standard account has met with severe criticisms (as we will see further), most contemporary textbooks on Indian history still begin with a section on the Aryans and their invasion (or immigration) into India. Likewise, standard descriptions of the caste system still include the idea of a segregation between the Aryans and the Dravidians.

Given the centrality of the Aryans in the descriptions of the caste system, one would expect there to be a vast amount of literature on how they invaded India, how they conquered the indigenous population, how they established their authority, how the acculturation process took place, how they managed to keep the caste system in place and how they managed to convert the existing population to their religion. Answers to these questions would not only be of interest to historians. They would give us insight into the core aspects of the Indian culture and, more generally, into aspects of the interaction between different peoples which result in acculturation or in inducing changes in a culture or even change of one culture into another. If it would turn out that no answers are to be found to these questions, however, a different question arises. In that case we need to understand what makes the account about the Aryan invasion appear plausible enough to be reproduced for more than 200 years.

In order to get an idea about whether or not these questions have been answered in the course of the last 200 years, we would do better to take a look at some recent introductions to Indian culture by authorities in the domain of Indology.

## The Aryan impact on India

In the most recent edition of his book *India*, Stanley Wolpert tells us that “*between about 1500 and 1000 B.C., Aryan tribes conquered the remaining pre-Aryan dasas throughout the Indus Valley and Punjab*”. The latter, he says, were “*enslaved*” by the Aryans.<sup>1</sup> Wolpert does not tell us much about how this happened, except for mentioning some of the weapons and other military equipment (the horse and chariot) used in this warfare. The relevance of the piece on the Aryan conquest of the pre-Aryan dasas becomes clear later in the book when Wolpert speaks of the caste system. This system, or the ‘four-varna hierarchy’, he tells us, consists of four groups of which the Shudras form the lowest rung. The latter he describes as the “*original serfs of the three-class Aryan tribal conquerors of North India*” who “*may well have been dasas, pre-Aryan slaves*”. “*Subsequent expansion of Aryan civilization*”, he continues, “*brought more ‘primitive’ peoples into the fold, who were so ‘barbaric’ or ‘polluted’ as to be added much beneath the varna hierarchy as ‘fifths’*”

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1 Stanley WOLPERT, *India*, Berkeley – Los Angeles 2009<sup>4</sup>, p. 28.

(panchamas), later known as Untouchables and now generally called Dalits, meaning oppressed people”.<sup>2</sup>

While Wolpert maintains that all of this happened, he does not speak about how the Aryan conquest occurred, what allowed for the conquest or even how it was sustained. Let us, therefore, see what follows from the course of events sketched by Wolpert. If what he says is true, we can conclude that: (1) Ancient India knew of at least three groups of people: conquering Aryan tribes, pre-Aryan dasas and even ‘more primitive’ peoples. (2) The dasas were enslaved by the Aryans. (3) The contemporary Shudras are the descendants of the dasa-serfs of the Aryan conquerors. (4) At the time of the conquest the latter were organized in a three-class system, which was the bearer of a civilization. (5) The ancestors of the Shudras did not belong to this Aryan civilization.

The fact that the dasas were conquered and enslaved shows that they were in one way or another not strong enough to resist the Aryans – in number, or with regard to military organization, kind of weapons, or otherwise. As Wolpert mentions, the Aryans brought the horse to India and their horse-drawn chariots and their archery (and axes) helped them to defeat all who confronted them. Thus, we can conclude that the weakness of the dasas to resist conquest is to be located partially in the absence of such military equipment. But he also mentions another kind of weakness, one that allowed the Aryans to sustain their position without military intervention for millennia: the low level of their civilization. The soon-to-be outcasts, he says, thanked their place outside the system to their “primitive” and “barbaric” status because of which they were placed beneath the four varna hierarchy as the “fifths” (panchamas) and thus “polluted”. The Shudras, who are just above them on the social ladder, are also primitive, barbaric and polluted but only less so than the outcasts. As such Wolpert postulates a link between the level of civilization of a group and its social position *vis-à-vis* other groups in a given society. The image that emerges from this is the following: (a) the newly arrived Aryans had a civilization and could form the first three orders of the newly composed society because of it; (b) the dasas were civilizationally less developed (the Indus civilization) and could hence be relegated into an inferior social position; (c) there were primitive people with no civilization to speak of who didn’t even get a place in the social system.

Looked at in this way, we can understand what it means for the Shudras and outcasts to be at the lower rung of the social hierarchy, that is, in what respects they are inferior: they are inferior in their level of civilization, they are less developed, more primitive and polluted. The fact that contemporary Shudras are still at the lowest rung of the varna hierarchy (being only slightly better than the outcasts) shows that they have retained

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2 *Ibidem*, p. 112.

this inferiority until today. It only becomes more blatant in view of the constitutional abolishment of the caste system and the ever growing number of government policies to improve the position of those groups considered to be at the lowest rung of society: the scheduled Castes (SC), the Scheduled Tribes (ST) and the Other Backward Castes (OBC).

That this is how Wolpert sees things is also apparent in his interpretation of the Ramayana as a historical record of these conquests and of the life of the Aryans. He says: “*The Ramayana may be read as an allegory of what Aryans saw as the conquest of ‘uncivilized demons’ who inhabited southern forests and disturbed the meditations of sadhus seeking enlightenment through yogic concentration.*” Rama’s defeat of Ravana symbolizes the Aryan conquest of non-Aryan demons in Gangetic forests, which “*permitted patient sadhus to continue silent yogic meditation*”.<sup>3</sup> Here Wolpert uses the Ramayana to depict the pre-Aryan dasas as uncivilized demons who disturbed the spiritual work of the sadhus, of whom it is suggested that they were Aryan. The Ramayana itself, however, says nowhere that Ravana is uncivilized or that he represents an uncivilized people who are out to disturb the patient and silent people in their civilized quest for spirituality. In fact, Ravana is portrayed as a seeker of spiritual truth himself!

Wolpert reveals the source of his knowledge: “*All that we know about the early Aryans*”, he says, “*was preserved through oral tradition by their priestly bards, Brahmans, whose heirs painstakingly memorized thousands of Sanskrit poetic hymns considered sacred, eventually recording their scripture in ‘Books of Knowledge’ called Vedas, most important of which is the Rig*”.<sup>4</sup> But then ‘all that we know’ turns out to be not very much as he adds that the Vedas “*report nothing about the pre-Indian history of the Aryans, nor do they say anything specific concerning the Aryan conquests or Indus Valley civilization, except for a few references to ‘dark’ (dasa) peoples who lived in ‘fortified cities’ (pur) and had to be ‘subdued’*”.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the only source on the basis of which Wolpert makes these claims are texts that do not contain any references to the things he reads in them. Regardless of the reasons why the Vedas are not historical accounts, we can conclude that none of the claims of Wolpert has any textual or historical ground. Moreover, if what he says is true then a large part of the Indian society has to thank its low position to a weakness handed down over generations, dating back to their original defeat by the Aryans. The only cause of their inferior position, if we accept Wolpert’s account, is their weakness as a people to resist the laws and religion of a ‘superior’ people. Of course, this ‘superiority’ can only be ‘civilizational’ today, given that neither archery nor horses plays much of a role in the twenty-first century India.

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3 *Ibidem*, p. 30.

4 *Ibidem*, p. 27.

5 *Ibidem*, p. 28.

In Wendy Doniger's book on the Hindus, we find a similar account. Aware of the recent controversies about the Aryan theories, Doniger is critical of the notion of the 'Aryans' and prefers to speak of the 'Vedic people' instead. The latter is defined as the community that composed the Vedas.<sup>6</sup> Apart from this cautious signal, her account of Indian history is very similar to Wolpert: the Vedic people is the conqueror that relegated the indigenous inhabitants, the Dasas, to the lowest social position in the caste system.<sup>7</sup>

The Vedic people at first distinguished just two classes (*varnas*), their own (which they called Arya) and that of the people they conquered, whom they called Dasas (or Dasyus, or, sometimes, Panis). The early Veda expresses envy for the Dasas' wealth, which is to say their cattle, but later, "Dasa" came to be used to denote a slave or subordinate, someone who worked outside the family, ...<sup>8</sup>

In other words, according to Doniger, the original inhabitants of India were first conquered and then enslaved by the Vedic people. These people are also regarded by her as the ancestors of the Shudras. The foundation of this system is traced to the Vedic account of the sacrifice of the Primeval Man (in the Purushasukta). According to her interpretation of this hymn, the feet of the primeval man, which she considers to be "*the lowest and dirtiest part of the body*", became "*the servants (Shudras), the outside class within society that defines the other classes*".<sup>9</sup>

Of course, feet are not necessarily dirty and if a body is lying down – as it is during a sacrifice – it is not the lowest part of the body either. In other words, the verse itself does not claim nor imply a low position of the Shudras. Let us now consider Doniger's depiction of the Shudras. Here she tells us that the Shudras are an outside class, which means they are outside of society, while being a part of the society at the same time. It is not possible that they are both outside and inside of society at the same time, unless 'being a part of the society and being outside it' refer to two different aspects of society. The question then is what they are outside of? In the absence of further clarifications, the only way we can understand this is that the Shudras are part of society in the sense that they live in it and are outside of it in the sense that they do not play a role in society other than being servants. Or, they are a part of society but are not allowed to participate in it the way the other classes are. From this position, Doniger adds, they "*define the other classes*". Thus, they show who the inside classes are defined negatively: everyone except themselves. Even though this still does not tell us what exactly the Shudras are outside of, we do learn that their low position involves some kind of an exclusion from

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6 Wendy DONIGER, *The Hindus: an Alternative History*, New York 2009, p. 90.

7 *Ibidem*, pp. 116–117.

8 *Ibidem*.

9 *Ibidem*, p. 118.

a significant aspect of society. This exclusion, we also learn, goes back a few thousands of years ago, when they were added to the society of the conquering Vedic people. Here is how she knows this:

*“That the Shudras were an afterthought is evident from the fact that the third class, Vaishyas, is sometimes said to be derived from the word for “all” and therefore to mean “everyone”, leaving no room for anyone below them – until someone added a class below them.”<sup>10</sup>*

Apparently this is evidence enough for Doniger. The problem with this argument, however, is that it is not so evident. If what Doniger says is true, that is, if the term ‘Vaishya’ indeed meant ‘everyone’ and if it did refer to one of the groups in the social structure of the Vedic people, then ‘everyone’ would also have left no room for those above them, not only for those below. In that case the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas would also have been an ‘afterthought’ or classes that were added later on. This is unlikely given the central role that is ascribed to the Brahmins as the priests of the Vedic people and originators of the caste system.

Having ‘established’ that the Shudras were a later addition, Doniger then speculates about who they were:

*“The fourth social class may have consisted of the people new to the early Vedic system, perhaps the people already in India when the Vedic people entered, the Dasas, from a system already in place in India, or simply the sorts of people who were always outside the system.”<sup>11</sup>*

Let us consider these different possibilities and what they tell us about the ancestors of the Shudras. In each case, the Shudras consist of people newly introduced to the Vedic system. Perhaps, as she says, these people were the Dasas, who either entered the Vedic system leaving their own system behind, or entered without being a part of any system before. If the latter is the case, that is, if they were indeed people who were always outside ‘the system’ then it is up to Doniger to explain why they entered the Vedic system. In both cases, an explanation is required as to why the newly encountered people either ‘joined’ a system for the first time or abandoned their own system. In the absence of such an explanation, why should we assume that they were forced to enter it and stay there? Doniger does not refer to the use of any force in this regard. This leads us to assume further that there was no need for using force because the dasas were simply too weak to resist the Vedic people and their system. Another possibility is that the Vedic system had a dynamic of its own that automatically drew in new people and

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem.*

provided them an inferior position. First, nobody so far has indicated such a dynamic and second, one would need to explain why many other newcomers, such as for instance the Mughals, were not automatically drawn in and reduced to an inferior position. If one relies on the strength of the Mughals (either in terms of their weapons, wealth, or their ‘system’) to account for the fact they did not become part of the Vedic system then the appeal is once again to the relative weakness of the dasas in order to explain why they were drawn in whereas others were not. A third possibility is that there was something extremely attractive to the Vedic system, attractive enough to draw people in despite awarding them a low position. Again, however, this only applies to some newcomers and transforms the dasas into idiots because they are attracted to something that makes them inferior.

The only conclusion we can draw on the basis of what Doniger tells us is that the Vedic people were more successful in establishing their social system in India than the people who had lived there. Not only were the Vedic people strong enough to make their social system prevalent but they also imposed it on others and reduced them to an inferior position.

In other words, the Shudras are seen as the descendants of an original people of India that could easily be subdued and subordinated to the authority of the Vedic people to such an extent that the former willingly accepted an inferior position in society. The only ground that Doniger provides for this thesis is a weak consideration, which is based on a possible interpretation of the meaning of the term ‘Vaishya’. In the absence of further explanations for the success of the Vedic people to subordinate the dasas, or references to the strategies that the Vedic people used to maintain their position, we are to assume a relative weakness of the Shudras *vis-à-vis* the Vedic people. If we accept that people in India today still live according to the Vedic system of caste division we are once again forced to conclude that this weakness has been handed down over generations along with their inferior social position.

A last example of the Aryans in the contemporary literature on the Indian culture is *A History of India* written by Kulke and Rothermund. These authors speak about the “immigration and settlement of the Indo-Aryans” and call it a “major historical event” that occurred in the second millennium BC, the early history of the south Asian subcontinent, “after the rise and fall of the Indus civilization”. The Aryans, they say, were a “semi-nomadic people which called itself Arya in its sacred hymns came down to the north-western plains through the mountain passes of Afghanistan”.<sup>12</sup> Aware of the controversy about the Aryan Invasion Theory (which we will discuss next) these authors mention that there

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12 Hermann KULKE – Dietmar ROTHERMUND, *A History of India*, New York 2010<sup>5</sup>, p. 12.

are several standpoints about the Aryan arrival into India: either it was an immigration, they say, *or* a conquest *or* it happened through waves of immigration. They even suggest that the Aryans could have been indigenous to India. Their own position includes two waves of Aryan immigrations and a conquest. The first wave of Aryan immigrations, they say, consisted of Indo-Aryan (IA) groups, some of whom might have come in earlier periods and thus account for the IA elements in the Harappan civilization. The Indo-Aryan groups are said to have been absorbed into the Indus civilization and:

*“may have become the upholder of an Indo-Aryan cultural synthesis, combining Indo-Harappan (and therefore perhaps also Dravidian) elements with their central Asian Aryan heritage. It is quite likely that this population was responsible for the continuity of certain traits of Harappan civilisation like the worship of animals and trees which changed and enriched the Vedic culture during the subsequent two millennia.”*<sup>13</sup>

The second wave, the authors tell us, were the (later) Rigvedic people of whom the former might or might not be the ancestors. This Vedic people, they further recount, invaded the indigenous people of India slowly and gradually:

*“The victories of the Vedic people over the indigenous population of northwestern India must have been due to their fast two-wheeled chariots, especially helpful in this dry and flat region, ... In spite of their strategic superiority the Vedic people did not sweep across the Indian plains in a quick campaign of universal conquest. They extended their area of settlement only very slowly. This may have been due to environmental conditions as well as to the resistance of the indigenous people. Moreover, the Vedic Aryans were not the disciplined army of one great conqueror. They consisted of several tribes which frequently fought each other.”*<sup>14</sup>

The sources about these Vedic victories are the Vedas themselves. Vedic hymns in which Indra or Agni fight the Dasas, for instance, are taken as a proof of fights between the Vedic people and the indigenous Indians. On the basis of such hymns these authors say that *“the dark-skinned indigenous people who are referred to as Dasas or Dasyus in the Vedic texts were depicted as the ubiquitous foes of the Aryans”*.<sup>15</sup>

In the final stage of the composition of the Rigveda the Vedic Aryans moved deeper into India to the region of the Ganga-Yamuna Doab.<sup>16</sup> This brought about a change from semi-nomadic life to settled agriculture which was accompanied by constant fights. This period is referred to as the Late Vedic Age.

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13 *Ibidem*, p. 13.

14 *Ibidem*, pp. 15–16.

15 *Ibidem*.

16 *Ibidem*, p. 17.



Settled life produced a great deal of social change, of intensified conflict with the indigenous population and of internal stratification of the Aryan society.<sup>17</sup>

Which brings us to the “[s]ocial differentiation and the emergence of the caste system”. According to Kulke and Rothermund, internal stratification had already existed among the early Vedic tribes, between the ordinary free members of the tribe and the warrior nobility. And the Brahmins as priests were also mentioned as a distinct social group in the Early Vedic texts.<sup>18</sup> But, “[w]hen the semi-nomadic groups settled down they established closer relations with the indigenous people who worked for them as labourers or artisans. Colour (varna) served as the badge of distinction between the free Aryans and the subjugated indigenous people. Varna soon assumed the meaning of ‘caste’ and was applied to the Aryans themselves in order to classify the strata of priests, warriors, free peasants and the subjugated people. A late hymn of the Rigveda contains the first evidence of this new system. It deals with the sacrifice of the mythical being Purusha and the creation of the universe and of the four varnas and assumed great normative importance for the ordering of Hindu society and legitimising the position of the Brahmin priests at the apex of the social hierarchy.”<sup>19</sup>

Again the original social stratification of the four varnas is described in terms of a free group and a subjugated group, the former being the Aryans and the latter the indigenous people of India. Here too the only ground that is given in support of this historical account is the Rigvedic Purushasukta verse.

## **A conquest without an invasion?**

We already said that the centrality of the Aryans in the descriptions of the Indian culture in general and the caste system in particular leads us to expect more literature on how this all happened. Without an evidence-based and reasonable explanation of how the Aryans succeeded in establishing a system that reduced the indigenous population of India to a lower position in society, there is no ground to retain this account. We did not find such an explanation in the Indological literature, but what about the literature provided by those domains that deal with the ancient past of cultures: linguistics, archaeology and more recently also genetics? The latter, we expect to provide the scientific ground for the overviews of the development of the Indian culture, or at least to show why it is reasonable to accept them. This, it turns out, is not the case. Instead what we find in

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17 *Ibidem*, p. 18.

18 *Ibidem*, p. 19.

19 *Ibidem*.

these domains are studies revolving around one single question: *where did the Aryans come from?*

This question, moreover, is not related to an effort to understand the Aryan impact on the Indian culture. Nor did it arise from any observed problems or inconsistencies in the descriptions of the Indian culture or the Aryan role in it. Instead, it finds its origin in criticisms of the claim that the Aryans originally came from outside the Indian subcontinent. Some of these criticisms have sound academic grounds. It has, for instance, been shown by archaeologists and studies into the genetic structure of the Indian population that an invasion could not have taken place in India. Other criticisms apply to the notion of 'the Aryans' and the difficulty in identifying them in the historical record. Apart from these problems there are also criticisms that are less scientific or even political in nature. As a result the debate over the origin of the Aryans has become highly politicized. The party that claims an Indian origin for the Indo-Aryan civilization is tied to the agenda of Hindu nationalism and it rejects the Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT) as a Eurocentric misconception and colonial imposition. Its opponents, on the other hand, claim to fight the Hindu nationalist misrepresentation of history but are often no more scientific, and in some cases even as ideological as their opponents, when it comes to linking their linguistic, archaeological and other scientific evidence to claims about the Aryans as a people.

So, on the one hand, there is an account, the Aryan invasion or immigration theory, which is being reproduced as though it is self-evident and self-illuminating. On the other hand, there is a controversial debate about only one aspect of this account, *viz* the origin of the Aryans. In other words, the criticisms of the AIT are limited to the idea of a foreign origin of the Aryans. They neither apply to nor affect the theses about the role this people is supposed to have played in the development of the Indian culture let alone of the caste system. As it is the latter that interests us here, we will not go deeper into the different arguments and evidences that have been given over the last decades about the supposed birthplace of the Aryans. What is interesting for our purposes, though, are some of the discoveries that have been made in the framework of this debate. One such is the problematic nature of the idea of an *invasion*. As we said, archaeologists and experts in human genetics have shown that the large scale invasion postulated by the AIT could not have taken place on the Indian soil. With this, one of the core aspects of this theory has been discarded. It also gives us a negative answer regarding the question how the Aryans were able to have had the impact they are said to have had: it could not have been through invasion or conquest. Even though this has not completely seeped through to other domains dealing with India, such as Indology, it can no longer be denied in those domains that deal with the study of the ancient past.

Regardless of which philosophy of science one adheres to, we can say that the refutation of one of the core elements of a theory creates a problem for that theory as a whole. No matter how one solves this problem, the solution should not be *ad hoc* in the sense that it is constructed only to account for the recalcitrant phenomenon. With this in mind, let us look at the way scholars have dealt with the problem of the non-occurrence of an invasion.

The first alternative, the Aryan Migration Theory (AMT), solves the problem by claiming that the Aryans came to India and did the same things claimed by the AIT but through peaceful immigration: they imported the Indo-Aryan languages, Vedic religion and the hierarchical social structure and imposed these on the local population. In the process, the caste system that put the Aryans on top of society and the original population at the lowest rung of the system was established. In other words, this alternative comes down to little more than a change of terms: instead of ‘invasion’ one now uses the term ‘immigration.’

The second alternative has been called the ‘Out of India Theory’. This theory claims that an invasion never occurred because the Aryans originated in India itself and moved out from there to other parts of the world. Even though this alternative appears to be a radical opposite to the AIT, it does not differ much from the AMT. Studies in support of the Out of India Theory are mostly concerned with disproving the foreign origin of the Aryans and proving that the Vedic tradition is indigenous to India. The description of the Aryans and their dominant role in the Indian culture are largely accepted. In these accounts, the Aryans are still the people who gave India its religion, language and caste system. The main difference between the ‘Out of India’ (OIT) theories and the AIT/AMT lies in the fact that in the former the existence of another indigenous population or their subjugation, and hence the origin of the caste system is largely absent. For this reason we will leave this alternative out of the picture here and focus only on the first alternative, the AMT.

If we accept that it is possible to replace the term ‘invasion’ by ‘immigration’ without changing anything else to the Aryan theory then we can reformulate the thesis as follows: the Aryans were able to impose their culture, language, religion on an indigenous population, and in the process reduce the latter to an inferior position, without the use of military force. In other words, the Aryans subordinated the dasas, converted them and imposed their language in a peaceful way. *How were they able to do this?* What made the indigenous population of India take over an alien language, religion and social structure that made them inferior?

So far, I have encountered only two scholars who have addressed this question. The first is Koenraad Elst, who answers the question negatively by saying that they could

not have managed to impose their culture, language, religion and social structure on the indigenous population without conquest. Even though the different versions of the Aryan migration theories speak of an immigration, he argues, they nevertheless *imply* an invasion or at least the use of military force. In order to acquire a position in which they could impose their language and culture on an existing population, they would first need to become the ruling class and if they had to do this peacefully they would first have needed to become proficient in the existing languages in India, which did not happen according to the AMT. “So how”, he asks, “could these Aryan immigrants first peacefully integrate into Harappan or post-Harappan society yet preserve their language and later even impose it on their host society? Neither their numbers, relative to the very numerous natives, nor their cultural level, as illiterate cowherds relative to a literate civilization, gave them much of an edge over the natives.” According to him, “the only plausible way for them to wrest power from the natives must have been through their military superiority, tried and tested in the process of an actual conquest”.<sup>20</sup> But then, it has been shown that an invasion could not have taken place. For him, this inconsistency is one of the reasons to reject both the AIT and the AMT and to argue that it is more plausible that the Aryans were indigenous to India.

The second approach to this question I have encountered is by the expert in Indian rituals Frits Staal. He suggests that the migrating Aryans, one of the tribes mentioned in the Vedas, must have been much smaller in number than the indigenous population, the people of the Indus Civilization. Not only were they smaller in number, the Aryans “came trickling in over many centuries”.<sup>21</sup> His hypothesis is this: the indigenous population of India took over an alien religion, language and culture because of two things: (1) the disintegration of the Indus Valley had left behind a “gap into which anything could fall and disappear” and (2) the “power of mantra” of the Vedas. Let us consider this hypothesis in detail: “The Indus Civilization ... was weakened and exhausted by the time the first so-called ‘family books’ of what was later called the Rigveda appeared on the scene... They [the Vedas] would not have attracted anyone’s attention had not the Indus Civilization left a large gap into which anything could fall and disappear. Thus was Vedic added to many Indian languages already spoken – but it did not disappear. On the contrary, its impact deepened and the seeds were sown to produce what with hindsight we have come to regard as ‘Vedic civilization’, a new Oral Tradition.”<sup>22</sup>

20 Koenraad ELST, *Linguistic Aspects of the Aryan Non-Invasion Theory*, in: Edwin F. Bryant – Laurie L. Patton (eds.), *The Indo-Aryan Controversy: Evidence and Inference in Indian History*, London 2005, p. 235.

21 Frits STAAL, *Discovering the Vedas, Origins, Mantras, Rituals, Insights*, New Delhi 2008, p. 18.

22 *Ibidem*, p. 15.

If there was a ‘large gap into which anything could fall and disappear’, why did the Vedas not suffer from the same fate? If the Vedas were accepted as the new foundation of society by a people that had never heard of these texts before, there must have been something very convincing about these Vedas. This was indeed the case, Staal suggests: the “*power of mantra*”. This power was attributed to the Vedic seers who were also their poets and sages.<sup>23</sup> What made the Vedic mantra so powerful? Staal does not answer this question. In that case, we are left with a circular reasoning: the Vedic mantra was powerful because the Vedas were accepted and the Vedas were accepted because of the power of the Vedic mantra. Unless Staal wants to attribute magical powers to the Vedic mantra there is a problem: unless the people that adopted the Vedic tradition were familiar with traditions similar to the Vedic tradition or some aspects of it, they would not have been able to recognize the ‘power’ of the Vedic mantra. In other words, there must have already been a shared culture that allowed the Vedas to have such a huge impact. In that case, the influence of the Aryans disappears. If none of the aspects of the Vedic tradition were familiar in India at that time, why would people spontaneously take over the tradition of a handful of people? The Vedic mantra, after all, is not agriculture. For several centuries now, western scholars have studied the Vedas but without recognizing the ‘power of mantra’. Neither have they taken over the ‘Vedic culture’ in spite of its supposed power. If people from the western culture have not recognized ‘the power of the mantra’ after three hundred years of studying it, what enabled the people living in India to do so? One possibility is that they shared a common culture, or at least a culture that was similar enough to make a tradition like the Vedic one intelligible and accessible. In other words, the Vedas might have been new and composed by a small number of people but the culture of which they were a part could not have been new. If that is the case, the Vedas cannot represent the culture of a separate people.

Staal is one of the very few authors who take the question of the Aryan influence (without an invasion) seriously. For others, like Witzel, it is sufficient to argue that the Aryans could not have been indigenous to India. The rest happened ‘somehow’:

*“The ‘Aryan question’ is concerned with the immigration of a population speaking an archaic Indo-European (IE) language, Vedic Sanskrit, who celebrate their gods and chieftains in the poems of the oldest Indian literature, the Rgveda, and who subsequently spread their language, religion, ritual, and social organization throughout the subcontinent.”*<sup>24</sup> “[I]t is important to note that not

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23 *Ibidem*, pp. 15–16.

24 Michael WITZEL, *Indocentrism: Autochthonous Visions of Ancient India*, in: Edwin F. Bryant – Laurie L. Patton (eds.), *The Indo-Aryan Controversy: Evidence and Inference in Indian History*, London 2005, p. 341.

*only the Vedic language but the whole complex material and spiritual culture has somehow been taken over and absorbed in the northwest of the subcontinent.*<sup>25</sup>

If we believe Witzel, the pre-Aryan population of India was simply waiting for the Aryans to arrive and bring them civilization, willing to accept everything that came their way. This is highly unlikely. It becomes even more unlikely when we take into account that the only scientific evidence we have is about the presence of horse bones, spoke-wheeled chariots, certain kinds of pottery linked to the Vedas, or related to the original home of the Indo-European languages.<sup>26</sup> None of these facts allows us to postulate that the Shudras of today owe their unchangeable inferior position in society to their ancestors who accepted this place a few thousand years ago from a people that brought them a civilization in return. Not only is the available evidence inadequate to make this claim, it is also inadequate to claim that the Vedas formed the foundation of a culture or civilization. On the basis of what we know about ancient India, it is far more likely that the Vedic tradition came into being as part of, or within, a culture that was taking shape in India among and across many different peoples, coming from different parts of the world, speaking different languages, using different utensils and having different arts and practices. It would be interesting to know more about the nature of this culture and how it came into being. But as long as scholars see Indian culture as founded in texts like the Vedas, or as a result of the interactions between two peoples and cultures, the real questions cannot even be formulated.

The question we want to address next is the following: Given the problems identified in the above, how can we explain the persistence of the notion of the Aryans and their impact on the Indian culture? How can we understand that the AIT is accepted and reproduced as a valid theory when one of its core aspects, the invasion hypothesis, has been refuted? And, in the case of the AMT, how can we understand its acceptance in the absence of additional theses about how the Aryans were able to have the impact they are alleged to have had without a conquest?

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25 Michael WITZEL, *Aryan and Non-Aryan Names in Vedic India*, in: Johannes Bronkhorst – Madhav M. Deshpande (eds.), *Aryan and Non-Aryan in South Asia: Evidence, Interpretation and Ideology*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1999, pp. 389–390; emphasis added.

26 For an overview and analysis of the debate and the available evidence see Edwin F. BRYANT, *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate*, New York 2001.

## Christians and the Aryans

Several scholars have argued that biblical chronology was the conceptual framework for the postulation of the Aryans as a people. Scholars like Léon Poliakov<sup>27</sup> and Thomas Trautmann<sup>28</sup> argue that the idea of an Aryan people goes back to the biblical notion that each language is linked to a nation or a people's past.<sup>29</sup> This idea played a central role in the Christian project of locating the people of the world within the biblical family tree of the children of Noah. Only when one assumes that every language is linked to a people does a relation between two languages indicate a relation between two peoples. The common source for all languages related to one original people, Bryant<sup>30</sup> says, was embedded in “*the biblical version of history, in which Noah's three sons, Japhet, Shem and Ham, were generally accepted as being the progenitors of the whole of humanity*”. Before Babel, there was “*one human race speaking one language*”, which was then divided and dispersed over the earth. “*This theme, even when stripped of its biblical trappings, was to remain thoroughly imprinted in European consciousness until well into the twentieth century.*”<sup>31</sup>

As Trautmann<sup>32</sup> convincingly shows, the study of Indian languages was also placed within this project. The main concern of the linguists who compared languages at the end of the eighteenth century was to trace the dispersal of the sons of Noah in time and space. Thus, when William Jones disclosed the link between Sanskrit, Latin and Greek in 1786,<sup>33</sup> he also postulated a connection between these languages and a lineage of nations. Jones was unambiguous about the project of tracing ‘all the nations’ of the world back to the three sons of Noah. He approached the linguistic discoveries as evidence for a common ancestry for Indians and Europeans, whom he considered to be descendants

27 Léon POLIAKOV, *Le Mythe Aryan: Essai sur les Sources du Racisme et des Nationalismes*, Paris 1971.

28 Thomas R. TRAUTMANN, *Aryans and British India*, Berkeley 1997; Thomas R. TRAUTMANN, *Languages and Nations: Conversations in Colonial South India*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2006.

29 See also: Stefan ARVIDSSON, *Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science*, trans. by Sonia Wichmann, Chicago 2006; E. BRYANT, *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture*; Jim G. SHAFFER – Diane A. LICHTENSTEIN, *South Asian Archaeology and the Myth of Indo-Aryan Invasions*, in: Edwin F. Bryant – Laurie L. Patton (eds.), *The Indo-Aryan Controversy: Evidence and Inference in Indian History*, London 2005, pp. 75–104.

30 E. BRYANT, *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture*.

31 *Ibidem*, p. 16.

32 T. R. TRAUTMANN, *Aryans and British India*; T. R. TRAUTMANN, *Languages and Nations*.

33 William JONES, *The Third Anniversary Discourse, Delivered 2 February, 1786, by the President, Asiatic Researches 1, 1788*, pp. 415–431.

of Ham (contrary to most of his contemporaries, who saw in the Indo-Europeans the descendants of Japhet).<sup>34</sup>

But, what is often ignored is that Jones' discovery only gave ground to claim that Indians and Europeans shared a common lineage in the biblical family tree. Jones cannot take the credit for the idea of an Aryan people. Not only because this people was baptized as Aryans only a few decades later, but also because the idea that the Brahmins and the Vedas represented a people was already in place much before the discovery of the Indo-European language family. The same goes for the speculations about the relation between this people and the other known people of the world. In the first half of the eighteenth century, several French clerical scholars had already speculated that the Brahmins, the "*ancient inhabitants of India*" or the representatives of "*the Brahmanical faith*" had originated as an ancient Egyptian colony. Father Catrou had reached this conclusion because of similarities between the "*morals, religion and customs*" of the Brahmins and those of the Egyptians.<sup>35</sup> In 1777, Père Coeurdoux had proposed that the Brahmins were the progeny of Japhet. According to him, it was beyond doubt that India had known invasions of groups coming from the north and that one of these had brought the Brahmins and their religion to India.<sup>36</sup> From the end of the eighteenth century onwards, scholars began to refer to 'the Hindus', the nation that was described as having the Brahmins as its priests and the Vedas as its sacred texts. Even though the discovery of the Indo-European language family in this period gave rise to a proliferation of speculations about the origin of the Sanskrit-speaking people, this people continued to be called the 'Hindu' or 'Brahmanical' people and Sanskrit as the 'Brahmanical' language or tongue.

Trautmann tells us that at some point, even at a time when the AIT was still acquiring its final form, the direct link between a people and a language was discarded and scholars ceased to place the Indian people within the biblical family tree.<sup>37</sup> What didn't cease, however, were the theories about an Aryan people or race. This can mean one of two things about the Christian influence on the idea of an Aryan people: either the Biblical idea of a direct link between peoples and languages only played a heuristic role and led

34 William JONES, *Discourse the Ninth. On the Origin and Families of Nations. Delivered 23 February, 1792*, in: *The Works of Sir William Jones in Thirteen Volumes*, Vol. 3, London 1807, pp. 194–195.

35 François CATROU, *Histoire Générale de l'Empire du Mogol depuis sa Fondation*, La Haye 1708; Pierre-Daniel HUET, *Histoire du Commerce et de la Navigation des Anciens*, Paris 1727<sup>3</sup>; Maturin Veyssière La CROZE, *Histoire Du Christianisme Des Indes*, La Haye 1724.

36 Sylvia MURR, *L'Inde Philosophique entre Bossuet et Voltaire – I. Moeurs et Coutumes des Indiens (1777): Un Inédit du Père G.-L. Coeurdoux s.j. dans la Version de N.-J. Desvaulx*, Paris 1987, p. 18.

37 T. R. TRAUTMANN, *Aryans and British India*, pp. 194–198; Thomas R. TRAUTMANN, *Introduction: What is the Aryan Debate?*, in: Thomas R. Trautmann (ed.), *The Aryan Debate*, New Delhi 2005, p. xxx.



to the discovery of an Aryan people, or the Biblical idea of the nation included more than a direct link between languages and people. From what we have seen above, the latter option seems to be the most likely one. The biblical notion of a link between nations and languages also included a link of both with religion. With the rejection of the direct link between a nation and a language, the link between a religion and a nation was not rejected; neither was the link between a religion and a sacred language. As such, the Vedas could form the glue between Sanskrit and the Hindu nation or Aryan people when the direct link between the latter was discarded. None of this, however, explains the idea of an original people of India and even less why these are said to have been invaded and subjugated by the Aryans. For a long time the ‘Hindu people’ or nation were thought to include all Indians, so the question is about what changed.

Whereas the idea of a Hindu, Vedic or Brahminical people goes back at least to the early eighteenth century, the Dravidians and the Aryan invasion theory are products of the first half of the nineteenth century (early suggestions of an aboriginal people excluded). Generally, this is explained as follows: scholars discovered the existence of a language family different from the Indo-European one and concluded that these were the languages of a different people, again based on the idea that all languages are directly linked to a people. But there are two problems with this explanation: (1) As we will see, the first formulations of the hypothesis of an invasion of the Brahminical people did not refer to the discovery of the Dravidian or another language family. (2) Even though the discovery of the Dravidian languages certainly played an important role in the establishment of the idea of a Dravidian people, it is still inadequate to explain the development of the invasion hypothesis.

## Between Paris and Madras

The hypothesis of a ‘Hindu conquest of India’ crystallized in two different locations in the early nineteenth century. The first was the select club of Orientalists at the *Société Asiatique de Paris*; the second was the circle of scholars around F. W. Ellis and Colin Mackenzie at the College of Fort St. George in Madras. These are the two places where the hypothesis crystallized but soon it was taken over by scholars all over Europe, including Germany.

## The invasion hypothesis

An early instance of the idea of the invasion is found in *Historical Sketches of the South of India* by Colonel Mark Wilks.<sup>38</sup> Formerly a political resident at the Court of Mysore, Wilks

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38 Mark WILKS, *Historical Sketches of the South of India*, vol. 1, London 1810.

was appointed as town major of Fort St. George, the capital of the Madras Presidency. Based on his readings of the ‘Laws of Manu’ – the dharmashastra text identified by the British as the sacred law book of the Hindus – Wilks introduced the notion of a “*Hindoo conquest*”, which he saw as the cause behind the formation of the caste system. (Early nineteenth century scholars understood the following when they spoke of the caste system: a hierarchical social system established in religious laws that divides people into superior and inferior groups. This hierarchy is reflected in their social position and their privileges.) He referred to the traditional tale of a king who in “*about 1450 years before Christ*” had “*reduced Hoobasica, a Hullia or Pariar king, and all his subjects, to a state of slavery, in which their descendants continue to this day*”. According to him, this story gave “*grounds*” for a “*conjecture which many circumstances will support, that these unhappy outcasts were the aborigines of India; and that the establishment of castes was not the effort of a single mind, but the result of successive expedients for retaining in subjection the conquests of the northern Hindoos; for they, also, are confessedly from the north*”.<sup>39</sup> Wilks mentioned two nations or peoples, the Hindus as opposed to the aboriginal people they were supposed to have conquered; he identified the Hindus as the superior castes of the caste system and imagined that the establishment of the caste system was the result of the Hindu conquest. Except for the traditional story, Wilks did not refer to any facts and failed to mention the ‘many circumstances’ supporting his conjecture.

Some of the French Orientalists had come to similar conclusions in the first half of the nineteenth century in Paris, ‘the hub of oriental scholarship’ during this period. In his *Monuments Anciens et Modernes de l’Hindoustan*, Mathieu Louis Langlès<sup>40</sup> expanded on the thesis of an invasion. Langlès was a student of Silvestre de Sacy, the influential scholar and founding father of the *Société Asiatique de Paris*. The second volume of his work contained an elaborate essay on the religion, laws and customs of the Hindus, where he pitied them for being supplanted first by Muslim conquerors and then by English merchants, similar to the ancestors of the Hindus themselves, who “*no doubt in a distant past, since the memory of it has been lost, had supplanted the indigenous inhabitants of India, of which the caste of Pariahs probably offers us the sad remains*”.<sup>41</sup> Without giving evidence, Langlès described the Pariahs as the descendants of an indigenous population conquered by Hindu invaders; he never defended this claim about the Hindu conquest of an aboriginal people in terms of linguistic differences.

39 *Ibidem*, pp. 150–151.

40 Louis Mathieu LANGLÈS, *Monuments Anciens et Modernes de l’Hindoustan, Décrits Sous le Double Rapport Archéologique et Pittoresque, et Précédés d’une Notice Géographique, d’une Notice Historique*, 2 vols, Paris 1821.

41 *Ibidem*, p. 170. All citations from French works have been translated into English.

To Langlès these ideas appeared to reflect established facts. However, in a review article of the same work, published by Abel Rémusat in the *Journal des Savans* of 1822, it became clear how new this idea of a Hindu conquest of India actually was. Rémusat was a founding member of the *Société Asiatique* and would later become its president. In his review article, he mentioned the hypothesis of a foreign invasion as an idea “of little importance”, but noted that the hypothesis at least deserved some elaboration, “if only for the sake of its novelty”. Fascinatingly, Rémusat gave the following reason for retaining the hypothesis in spite of the lack of evidence: “This is without a doubt only a hypothesis, one that is strengthened by no historical monument whatsoever; but we have to agree that it offers a high enough degree of probability, and that it is difficult to study the system of castes, and to investigate the origin of the laws that the two first [castes] attributed to themselves with regard to the last two [castes], without the idea of a conquest presenting itself to the mind, as a way to explain the excessive superiority of the ones and the extreme degradation of the others.”<sup>42</sup>

In the absence of any linguistic or archaeological facts that supported the hypothesis, Rémusat still considered the hypothesis unavoidable if one desired to understand the caste system.

Even where the hypothesis was questioned, its potential utility as an explanation of the origin of the caste system was admitted. In a review article of a translation of the *Lois de Manou*, Alexandre Langlois,<sup>43</sup> another member of the *Société Asiatique*, wondered whether the laws of Manu and the caste system had been “imported by the colony that is to have come from the north-west to establish itself in India in a time beyond memory”. Have they, he asked, “been imposed on the indigenous people by a more powerful and enlightened conqueror? Or, are they the product of an Indian soil, the result of a slow and progressive civilization?” Given the fact that “the elements to decide on these questions may be missing for a long time to come”, Langlois favored the hypothesis that the caste system emerged as a variant of the natural process of growth of all societies, albeit constrained by philosophy in the case of India.<sup>44</sup>

Similar remarks are found in the work of the renowned Orientalist and professor of Sanskrit at the Collège de France, Eugène Burnouf. In a lecture on the Sanskrit language and literature, Burnouf<sup>45</sup> presented the hypothesis that the Indians had once been

42 Abel REMUSAT, *Monuments Anciens et Modernes de l’Hindoustan; par L. Langlès*, *Journal des Savans*, Avril 1822, pp. 224.

43 Alexandre LANGLOIS, *Manava Dharma Sastra*, in: *Journal Asiatique* 68.2, 1833, pp. 142–155.

44 *Ibidem*, pp. 143–144.

45 Eugène BURNOUF, *Discours sur la Langue et la Littérature Sanscrite, Prononcé au Collège de France*, in: *Journal Asiatique* 63.2, 1833, pp. 251–272.

“foreigners” to their own country. If this is the case, he added, it is probable that there had been original inhabitants of India, conquered by the currently dominant people. The most important and self-evident factual evidence for this claim, Burnouf said, was the caste system. According to Burnouf, the first thing every observer of India would notice was that underneath the “*apparent unity*” rests a variety of diverse cultural elements. The unity, he said, is provided by the religious and civil institutions that were spread by an enlightened race. The variety of cultural elements, on the other hand, reflected the remains of the native tribes and nations of India, which “*had been forced to submit themselves to*” the unity. For, he argued, “*those rejected castes at the lower ranks of the social hierarchy, are they anything else than the remnants of a conquered people?*”<sup>46</sup> Only then did Burnouf provide further ‘evidence’ about differences in language, skin colour and customs between the higher and lower castes to support this connection between the caste system and the invasion of an alien people. It is important to note that Burnouf does not compare the skin colour, languages or customs of north and south Indians, nor of the speakers of Sanskrit derived vernaculars as opposed to speakers of other languages, but rather the differences between the lower and higher castes of India. The hypothesis he intended to defend is not the existence of two distinct races in India as such, but the claim that the lower and higher castes had originally belonged to two different races.

Similar tentative statements are found in a review article written on Neumann’s *Coup d’œil Historique, Sur les peuples de l’Orient*, published in *Journal Asiatique*.<sup>47</sup> After stating that in the Indian legends of the Puranas and the Itihasas we look in vain for something that in the right acceptance of the word could be called history, the author goes on to say that we can nevertheless, “*following the many traditions and the inductions of the culture and language, conclude with a very great probability that the conquering Brahmans left from the north and continuously spread out towards the south*”. After he has stated the great probability of this conclusion he draws the following course of events: “*When the barbaric indigenous princes, who had, sword in hand, opposed themselves to the new doctrine, had been annihilated or subjugated, large numbers of Brahmin colonies coming from the north arrived in the south; new families of rulers came up, and the whole population seems to have been consigned to the last two castes of the Indian society, or to the class of laborers and servants.*”<sup>48</sup>

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, the hypothesis of the Aryan invasion had been accepted by most European scholars of Indian religion. Only occasionally

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46 *Ibidem*, p. 268.

47 ANONYMOUS, *Coup d’œil Historique, Sur Les Peuples de l’Orient, Par M. le Professeur Neumann, de Munich*, *Journal Asiatique* 80.2, 1834, pp. 81–114.

48 *Ibidem*, p. 83.

did the lack of evidence bring scholars to doubt its truth. But even where they did so, they nevertheless failed to reject the hypothesis. One of these scholars was Mountstuart Elphinstone, the Governor of Bombay. In his influential work *The History of India*, Elphinstone<sup>49</sup> considered the lack of evidence for the attribution of a foreign origin to the Indians. Nevertheless he felt compelled to acknowledge that the idea of an invasion was a very plausible explanation for the existence of the caste system. Based on his readings of the Vedas and the Laws of Manu, Elphinstone observed that “*the three twice-born classes forming the whole community*” were “*embraced by the law*”, while the Shudras were “*in a servile and degraded condition*”. Yet, he pointed out, “*it appears that there are cities governed by Súdra Kings, in which Bramins are advised not to reside*” and that, as the code of Manu stated, “*there are whole territories inhabited by Súdras, overwhelmed with atheists and deprived of Bramins*”.<sup>50</sup> He considered it “*impossible not to conclude from all this, that the twice-born men were a conquering people; that the servile class were the subdued aborigines; and that the independent Súdra towns were in such of the small territories, into which Hindostan was divided, as still retained their independence*”. Given his doubts about the foreign origin, however, Elphinstone suggested that the conquerors could also have been a “*local tribe like the Dorians in Greece*” or “*merely a portion of one of the native states (a religious sect for instance) which had outstripped their fellow-citizens in knowledge, and appropriated all the advantages of the society to themselves*”.<sup>51</sup>

What do these formulations tell us about the theoretical framework to which they belong? What concepts and theories had to be present in order to find the invasion hypothesis ‘the most plausible explanation’ or an ‘inevitable’ hypothesis to arrive at? Let us take a closer look at the points these citations have in common.

1) All these citations speak of the caste system as a social hierarchy, a system that determines a person’s position in society in terms of the higher and the lower: the Brahmins are higher than the Kshatriyas, after whom come the Vaishyas, followed by the Shudras who in turn are followed by the outcastes or the Pariahs. The latter are so low as to be excluded from the system altogether. Even though all these castes are referred to when these authors speak of ‘the caste system’, it is not the respective difference in hierarchy between all of these caste groups that draws their attention. Instead they make another division at a higher level of description: the first group consists of the first two or three castes (usually it is the first three but one of these authors speaks of only the first two), which they also call the ‘twice-born castes’. The second group consists of the Shudras and the outcastes. The first group is considered to be superior to the second

49 Mountstuart ELPHINSTONE, *The History of India*, Vol. 1, London 1841.

50 *Ibidem*, p. 95.

51 *Ibidem*, p. 96.

group. In other words, the degree of superiority or inferiority is neither constant nor proportional. These authors see a big gap with regard to social inequality between the first and the second group. It is this distinction that they attempt at explaining. That is, not all the inequalities established by the caste system are considered to be in need of explanation. It is only the extreme social inequality between the first and the second group that comes out as a problem to be explained.

2) Before we look into the explanations, let us consider what the respective superior and inferior position of both groups consists of, or what is meant when it is said that the Shudras had an inferior position in society. Even though these citations rely on a characterization of the caste system not made explicit there, we do read several references to the respective states of being of the two groups. The second group's 'extreme degradation' apart, they are alleged to be in a 'state of slavery', having a 'servile and degraded position' and are 'rejected'. The first group is described by Elphinstone as forming the 'community as a whole' and 'embraced by the law'. They are also depicted as the three twice-born castes. This refers to the group that has undergone the *upanayana* ritual, which was understood by the Europeans as a ritual through which one becomes part of the Vedic community. Based on the readings of the Laws of Manu, Europeans thought that the Shudras and the outcastes had no right to undergo this ritual and were, as such, excluded from participation in the Vedic community. That is why Burnouf says that the religious and civil institutions of the 'enlightened race' provided a unity to Indian society that was only apparent but not real. If the religious and civil institutions of a society are what makes this society into a unit or a coherent whole, we can assume that these institutions organize the life of all members of society. If the unity is only apparent, this means that these institutions do not organize the lives of all members of society. The 'variety' of Burnouf refers not to the mere existence of many cultural elements but also to the elements that would not exist in a society when the unity provided by the religious and civil institutions were to be real and not apparent. In other words, the first group forms the community organized according to the religious and civil institutions of that society. The second group consists of slaves who are rejected from this community. This is also in line with the concept of slavery. The most salient property of slaves is that they are not free to organize their life themselves; nor are they allowed to participate in the way of living of their masters. The difference then between the first and the second or the superior and inferior group is that the former, even if not internally equal, are all free to organize their lives according to the religious and civil institutions of their society. The second group, on the other hand, does not have the freedom to live according to these institutions but is there only to serve the first group. They are 'rejected' from participating in the religious and civil institutions or from being embraced by the law.

3) We now have a better idea of what the superiority of the former and the inferiority of the latter refers to: the former are civilized because they have religious and civil institutions that organize their lives, the second are inferior because they have no access to these institutions. Neither do they have religious and civil institutions of their own. It is this situation, and not the existence of social inequalities in a society as such, that draws the attention of these nineteenth century Europeans as something in need of an explanation. If we call the phenomenon these authors seek to explain as the ‘social inequality’ of the Indian society, this refers to a situation, where a part of society is excluded from social institutions. This social inequality is considered to be of a different kind than the inequalities between the first three castes.

4) This brings us to their explanation: the two groups represent two different races (race, nation and people are used interchangeably during this period) and the first group has conquered the second one. If the existence of social inequality in a society can lead to the conclusion that the superior and inferior group consist of two different peoples, races or nations then this presupposes that social inequality cannot exist within the ‘same people’. Or, that within the same people no group is excluded from the community, that is, from the religious and civil institutions.

5) The existence of social inequality, then, can point to the existence of two races or peoples. The fact that one race becomes superior and the other inferior is due to the respective strength of the civilizations of these two peoples. Burnouf, for instance, speaks of an ‘enlighted race’, as opposed to ‘tribes’ and ‘almost nations’. That is, he speaks of tribes that had not even reached the state of nationhood before the arrival of the Brahminical race. Other scholars of that period speak of the aborigines as savage and uncivilized. Some examples: Dr. Reverend Stevenson, a Protestant missionary working in the South of India, refers to the aborigines as “*unlettered and uncivilized*” and hence finds it plausible that the rakshasas and demons mentioned in the “*ancient traditions of the Brahmins*” refer to these original inhabitants of India.<sup>52</sup> Another example is found in an article on *The Kulin Brahmins of Bengal* published in *Calcutta Review* in 1844.<sup>53</sup> Here the author asks “*who the original inhabitants*” of India were even though he adds that this can “*only be a question of conjecture*” As the author specifies, these “*original inhabitants*” or “*aborigines*” are the population living in India prior to the invasion of the “*more civilized emigrants*” or the “*foreign colonists*”. The latter are characterized by their religion ‘Hinduism’ and their ‘Sanskrit literature’, viz the ‘Vedas’ and ‘Puranas’. The answer to this question seems to be a matter of preference or intuition rather than

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52 John STEVENSON, *On the Ante-Brahmanical Worship of the Hindús in the Dekhan*, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland 5, 1839, pp. 190–191.

53 ANONYMOUS, *The Kulin Brahmins of Bengal*, The Calcutta Review 2.3, 1844, pp. 1–31.

argumentation. The author is not willing to “believe” that the “existing occupiers of the soil are all descendants from the Aborigines”. Nor does he want to “admit” that they are all “colonists and emigrants”. Nor, he says, can it be “proved to anybody’s satisfaction” that the “wild hill tribes on the frontiers are the only relics of the first inhabitants”. Nevertheless, he considers the truth to “lie between these varying propositions”. Regardless of the fact that nothing seems to be based on any evidence, he finds the most likely candidates for the aborigines he is looking for in the people living in the “thickets of hills and mountain-fastnesses”. How is he able to identify them? This is how: they are “proper representatives of the people in their pristine condition” as opposed to the “more civilized emigrants”. In other words the descendants of the aboriginal population are identified on the basis of their absence of civilization, for which the only mentioned criterion is the religion, viz Hinduism, as found in the Sanskrit literature, of the ‘foreign colonists.’<sup>54</sup>

By the middle of the nineteenth century the conjecture or hypothesis about the invasion of an aboriginal people had gradually acquired the status of fact. Thus, Max Müller, one of the most important Indologists of this period and regarded by some as the father of the Aryan Invasion theory,<sup>55</sup> suggests that, the Rigveda, and “*Ramayana, Manu and Mahabharata*” reveal the whole account of how the “Brahminical tribes” conquered India step by step and established and spread their rule. The “Aryan tribes”, he says, “remained united by their common origin, by the ties of religion and of their sacred language”. The aboriginal inhabitants on the other hand, either fled to the refuge of the “thick forests of the mountainous districts, and in the south of the Vindhya range”, or “remained in a state of slavery, constituting the class of Sudras”.<sup>56</sup> Müller adds another remark which shows that the theory about the Aryan race and their invasion was part of a bigger conceptual framework: “We generally find that it is the fate of the negro race, when brought into hostile contact with the Japhetic race, to be either destroyed and annihilated, or to fall into a state of slavery and degradation, from which, if at all, it recovers by the slow progress of assimilation. This has been the case in the north of India. The greater part of its former inhabitants have entirely vanished at the approach of the Aryan civilization; some however submitted to the yoke of the conquerors, and many of these have, after a long time of slavery, during which they adopted the manners, religion and language of their superiors, risen to a new social and intellectual independence. The lower classes of the Hindus consist

54 *Ibidem*, p. 3.

55 Müller was the first to introduce the word ‘Aryan’ to designate the conquerors who brought the Vedic religion to India.

56 Max MÜLLER, *On the Relation of the Bengali to the Aryan and Aboriginal Languages of India*, in: *Three Linguistic Dissertations Read at the Meeting of the British Association in Oxford*, London 1848, pp. 329–330; emphasis added.



*of those aboriginal inhabitants, and some of them continue still up to the present day in a state of the utmost degradation, living as outcasts in forests or as servants in villages.*"<sup>57</sup>

With the focus on the caste system and the idea that the first three castes belonged to a different race than the Shudras and the outcasts, a range of other differences could now be plotted along to the same racial lines: difference in language use; difference in religion (when Stevenson saw signs of a different religions, for instance, he referred to them as non-brahminical religions, which indicate another people according to him); and difference in appearance and skin colour. All of these were now taken to signal the existence of two peoples that formed the upper and lower castes of the caste system. Whether the focus was on the social inequality of the caste system, on the difference in language, on the difference in looks or in the difference of religion, all these elements were related to each other as differences between two peoples where one had invaded the other and imposed its religion, law, language and customs on the other. In other words, the conceptual framework of European scholars at the beginning of the nineteenth century included the idea that a difference in language not only implied two peoples, but also two religions (in different stages of degeneration), two systems of law (or customs when the laws had not yet been fully developed) and a difference in general 'value' or state of civilization reflected in the social position of the respective peoples. If two peoples lived together it meant that the superior one had conquered the inferior people and subdued the latter to their own system of laws and religion.

Today, we want to suggest, these same ideas are what make the description of the caste system as an Aryan system of racial discrimination appear plausible enough to be reproduced in the absence of any evidence or explanations. The hypothesis presented in this article is that these notions are dependent on a set of Christian theological ideas from which they derive their intelligibility. For some of these ideas it has already been shown to be the case: S. N. Balagangadhara has shown, for instance, that the Vedas cannot be the sacred texts of Hinduism and that the claim that this is what they are is dependent on the Christian idea that God has given a sense of himself to the whole of mankind.<sup>58</sup> In the same way the idea that Sanskrit was the sacred language of a specific people is dependent on the Christian idea that each nation has its own language with which it transmits its religion. Today we know that Sanskrit was not the language of one people but a language developed for specific purposes and used by different linguistic communities. One of the aspects that remains to be explored is the idea of social inequality and its relation to national and religious differences. What does it mean, for instance, to say that the

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 348–349.

<sup>58</sup> S. N. BALAGANGADHARA, "The Heathen in His Blindness...": *Asia, the West and the Dynamic of*

Shudras are not 'embraced by the law' or are the 'outside class within society'? It is our hypothesis that these ideas are also dependent on a Christian notion of the nation, but this is something that needs to be taken up in future research.

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## Resumé

### Árjové a starověký kastovní systém

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V posledních dvou stoletích hledali tvůrci převládajících interpretací kořeny kastovního systému ve starověké Indii. Konkrétně spojovali původ kastovního systému s invazí Árjů, tj. lidí mluvících sanskrtem, o kterých tvrdili, že vnutili svůj jazyk, náboženství a sociální struktury původním obyvatelům zvaným Drávidové. Árjové si je prý podmanili, odsunuli je na okraj společnosti a učinili z nich nejnižší kastu. Jelikož má teorie o invazi Árjů zásadní význam pro naše chápání kastovního systému, autorka analyzovala odbornou literaturu

k tématu a zabývá se také otázkou, jaké máme pro danou teorii doklady. Došla k závěru, že v podstatě neexistuje žádný jasný důkaz pro tvrzení, že kastovní systém vznikl jako výsledek invaze Árjů do Indie. Autorka tedy sledovala vznik této teorie v evropské literatuře na počátku 19. století, aby zjistila, jak tato teorie vznikla a na čem byla založena. To jí umožnilo identifikovat předpoklady v pozadí vzniku teze, které umožňují, aby byla vnímána jako věrohodná ještě dnes.