

# Impact of the Colonial System to the History and Archaeology in India

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**ABSTRACT:** The idea of archaeological and historical research, in the contemporary sense, was introduced to India mainly due to the colonial system. Apart from archaeology, various other academic disciplines too had their beginnings during the colonial period. Many of these disciplines even working on the history and culture of India, since the colonial system felt that generation of knowledge about India could be useful in its project of subjugating India, although some of the individuals associated with the colonial system would have developed interest in the culture and history of India, simply out of curiosity.

Most of the interpretations that are offered on the history of India have been based on the ideas of Aryans, Dravidians and civilizations that were developed during the colonial period. The composition and transformation of population groups in India from the prehistoric to early historical period are very crucial for understanding the developments in Indian history and the processes involved in the development appear to be much more complex than what is conceived or imagined by historians, archaeologists and historical linguists. This paper argues that a major section of the populations of South India perhaps moved into this region from a much earlier period. It also highlights the need for decolonizing the practice of archaeology.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The idea of archaeological and historical research, in the contemporary sense, was introduced to India mainly due to the colonial system. Apart from archaeology, various other academic disciplines too had their beginnings during the colonial period. Many of these disciplines began working on the history and culture of India, since the colonial system felt that generation of knowledge about India could be useful in its project of subjugating India, although some of the individuals associated with the colonial system would have developed interest (and

'sympathy') in the culture and history of India, simply out of curiosity.

However, the strong impact of the colonial system in knowledge generation during the colonial period cannot be denied (Said 1978; Inden 1986). The notion behind the discipline of anthropology was largely colonial, and the colonial system sought to describe the nature of various castes and "tribes" in order to control and manage them for the smooth running of its machinery (e.g. Thurston and Rangachari 1909). The developments of archaeological research in theories and methods, even after the end of the colonial period, too resect the remnants of colonial thoughts. Several scholars have extensively worked on the beginnings of, and history of archaeology in India, and have analysed the development of archaeological thought in India and its course (Paddayya 1990, 2013; Chakrabarti 1997; Lahiri 2012; Pratap 2014; Guha 2015). The development of academic courses as part of education and training, and the formulation of narrowly structured syllabi for courses in various disciplines related to history and heritage, and the emergence of archaeology as a discipline focusing mainly on material culture, much distanced from history, literature, epigraphy, iconography, art and architecture or Indology in the Post-Independence era suggest the academic, socio-political issues involved in the development of academic studies on the Indian past.

We need to deconstruct and decolonize certain categories and concepts in the practice of archaeology, and to look critically into the extraneous definitions of culture related concepts and unilinear evolutionary models of cultural development (Inden 1986). The categories such as culture, civilization, Aryan and Dravidian need to be revisited and the early cultural formations of India have to be critically analysed in the light of archaeological, linguistic and cultural sources. This paper, a preliminary attempt to understand the early cultural, historical formations in South India, presents a brief outline of certain related ideas, which need further work. I am not delving into

linguistic prehistoric studies on India here, and the main objective is to raise certain questions rather than offering explanations or answers.

### The Research Problem

Historians and archaeologists working on the early cultures of India have attempted to correlate the living groups of people and the groups mentioned in the ancient texts, which belong to various linguistic families or regional cultures with the archaeologically identified cultures that are emic monoliths constructed out of material cultural characteristics in specific space-time contexts. Archaeology has always struggled to explain the appearance of “new” archaeological cultures in a particular site or area, and often migration/diffusion was considered an important cause of changes in the archaeological cultural sequence, although such explanations are no longer accepted.

However, to explain the development of cultures in a particular region, the concept of migration and diffusions cannot be completely abandoned. The immense cultural diversity, and regional variations and local traditions in Indian history and culture, and their significance for understanding Indian history have been highlighted by a few researchers (Subbarao 1958; Kosambi 1965).

Scholars have sought to explain the origin of various groups of Indians, viz., Indo-Aryan, Austro-Asiatic, and Dravidian language speaking people, using linguistic (Witzel 2009), historical, archaeological, literary, and anthropological (Kennedy 2003; Lukacs 2013; Gwen Robbins and Walimbe 2016) (including DNA studies) sources. What was the language of the Harappans? Were they Aryans? Were they Dravidians? Various explanations have been offered for the origin of the Harappan, Neolithic, Chalcolithic, and Megalithic cultural traditions in India (Allchin and Allchin 1982). The cultural dynamics and emergence of population groups in the prehistoric and early historic periods have been very complex, and they are much beyond our comprehension.

I present a few of comments on the correlation of archaeological cultures and certain languages here. Coming to the population in Peninsular India, Allchin and Allchin have argued that in the Deccan region (Maharashtra) the original population of agricultural settlers was Dravidian speaking, and that the changes associated with the Jorve period coincided with the arrival of immigrants from the north, speaking an Indo-Aryan language. This language must have been the ancestor of modern Marathi” (Allchin and Allchin 1982: 352, as cited in Southworth 2004) The

Malwa culture is identified to have similarities with the Neolithic Cultures of Andhra-Karnataka region and Southworth (2006) has argued that: “The language of the Rigveda, the oldest known form of Indo-Aryan, is dateable to about 1500 BCE at the earliest. The proposed identification of Marathi speakers with the Jorve culture would imply that speakers of Indo-Aryan had already entered the Deccan at a time when the composers of the Rigvedic hymns were still located in the Panjab. If this were the case, then the assumed passage of the “outer group” languages through Sindh would have had to begin at least several centuries earlier, say by 1800-1700 BCE, and the earliest stage, represented by the more widely shared words discussed... above, would need to be placed in the neighbourhood of 2100-2000 BCE, implying that “outer group” Indo-Aryan speakers entered the Indus Valley before the end of the Indus Civilization.”

There are attempts to correlate the Neolithic Cultures of South India (Allchin 1963; Paddayya 1973, 2002; Nagaraja Rao 1969) and the dispersal of Dravidian language speaking populations (Fuller 2003a, 2003b, 2007, 2009). Boivin et al. 2007 argue that: “Our own findings at Sanganakallu-Kupgal, where the late Neolithic/early Iron Age transition is well attested, support the model of regional continuity (which might be linked to Dravidian linguistic continuity: Fuller 2003a). We see, for example, the gradual development of ceramic fabrics, types and styles, leading to the emergence of a new ceramic repertoire in the Iron Age. There is no evidence for any abrupt replacement of one group by another.”

Kumar and Reddy (2003) argue that: “Among the most contentious currently debated issues is about the people who had settled first in the Indian subcontinent. It has been suggested that the communities affiliated to the Austro-Asiatic linguistic family are perhaps the first to settle in India and the palaeoanthropological evidences suggest the earliest settlement probably around 60,000 years BP. Recent speculations, based on both traditional genetic markers and DNA markers, seem to corroborate the aforesaid view.”

As the views presented above suggest there have been several attempts to understand the movement of people and composition of various groups of people in the early historic period of India and to understand the diversity in the make-up of populations of India. The population diversity caused by regional cultural variations, migrations, and fusions might have been the reason for the varna and caste system of India. However,

archaeologists are reluctant to identify caste and its imprint in archaeology (Boivin 2005), although studies on genetic oriented anthropology have been obsessed with identifying castes and regional identities in the formation of populations of India. (al. 2001).

### **Problems of Unilinear Evolutionary Model**

Although the problems associated with the Unilinear Model of evolution in understanding the development of cultures have been criticized, this model is deeply entrenched in the mindset of archaeologists and their interpretations (Johnson 2010). Unilinear model of development and evolutionary ideas may not be very useful tools to explain the developments in cultural arenas, where complex processes were involved. Michel Foucault has challenged the logic behind the unilinear progressive notion (Bunton and Peterson 1997). The sequence of Mesolithic, Neolithic, and Iron Age is often discussed by researchers, and archaeological evidence is searched for such a sequence. When there is discussion about the Neolithic cultures of South India, other contemporary cultures are ignored or they are treated (or implied) as “inferior”, less advanced or primitive. We often notice the discussion of the Neolithic culture in a ‘spatial vacuum,’ ignoring other contemporary cultures, since the structures of monolithic, civilization, and progressive cultures are deeply embedded.

Therefore, a lot of thinking is necessary to dislodge the established structure of cultural sequence and ‘cultures’ (e.g. Harappan) in archaeological research. One of the options here would be to think of time-based frame of cultures, in the context of the conventional unilinear sequence. The cultures or cultural landscapes of the first millennium or third millennium BCE in India or in the sub-regions have to be analysed within a framework.

### **Neolithic Revolution And Chalcolithic “Superiority”**

The presence of pottery in agriculture, pastoralism, and the use of metal are traces of advancement, and more importance generally is given to the Neolithic and Chalcolithic cultures. The obsession with the Neolithic culture as representing a phase of revolution has forced archaeologists to concentrate on this culture, and treat this phase as a landmark. The notions behind the concept of Neolithic revolution have undergone much transformation (Dyson and Rowland 2007).

The idea of Neolithic revolution cannot be universally applied, and the processes of cultural

development were much more complex than what was imagined by archaeologists, and the notions of metal, agriculture and their role were more a result of the perceptions of archaeologists. The primary issue has been the perception of archaeologists as outsiders (etic) to these realities. The interactions between the Mesolithic hunter-gatherers and the Neolithic pastoral groups have to be studied in detail. The cultural way of life as hunter-gatherers continued in the later cultural periods in South India and it is not necessary that the formation of a political establishment took place among the pastoral or agricultural communities alone.

Early Tamil texts have references to the diverse groups of hunter-gatherers, pastoralists, and agriculturalists who continued to survive to the medieval period with some of the hunters involved in cattle lifting activities (Selvakumar 2014). Cultural Diversity from the Mesolithic and Post-Mesolithic Periods Cultural Diversity from the Mesolithic and Post-Mesolithic Periods Cultural Diversity from the Mesolithic and Post-Mesolithic Periods Harappan Culture and South India Most possibly, the cultures that developed in South India had no direct, significant relationship with the Harappan culture, although popular perceptions and early theories associated the Dravidian speakers with the Harappan culture.

The cultural diversity in South India points out that the Dravidian speakers might have moved into South India in the Mesolithic period or even before. Was the Neolithic population represented by the Dravidian speakers who had adopted agro-pastoralism as an adaptation to local environmental context? If at all there was movement of people, it might have been from the Chalcolithic or Later Harappan cultures, perhaps a small group, and so the movement of Harappan population to South India might not have been significant.

### **Iron Age-Early Historical Cultural Developments**

The Iron Age cultural remains are widely distributed in South India, and burials are found in all cultural contexts. The Iron Age population comprised of various groups and most probably it included settled agrarians, nomadic pastoral groups, and hunter-gatherers. The diversity of population is illustrated by the earliest strata of Tamil literature. The reason for population diversity cannot be attributed to mass migration from the Neolithic Core of South India, although migration was one of the factors responsible for the

population diversity in the region of South India. The abundance of the diverse variety of megalithic burials and cultural materials in South India suggest the movement of populations with pre-existing populations contributing to the diversity of groups. The idea of Populations, Geographical labels and Local Dialects From the available linguistic variations, population and their characteristics, geographical labels and local dialects in South India several native population groups could be identified.

The groups of people living in the Western Ghats region of Kerala perhaps belong to several clusters, but one group of population could be considered to have settled in the region in the Prehistoric period, probably in the Holocene or much earlier. Perhaps, the long duration of occupation of this population led to the variations in the nasal character of Malayalam language because of the rainy, comparatively cooler environmental context of Kerala and the physical adaptation of the people to the local weather conditions. Another population group in Southern part of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and some parts of Sri Lanka display certain similarities and perhaps they had an early origin. Some indigenous people of the Western Ghats might represent another population group. When such diverse Population groups exist in the region of South India, how can one explain that the "Dravidians" migrated from the Indus Valley civilization region en masse? How did these Populations and linguistic variations emerge in South India?

Early historic Tamil literature is a very clear proof that linguistic variations had developed in South India by about the second half of the early first millennium BCE. Therefore the linguistic similarity in South India must have developed from a much earlier period. Certain terms related to hills and stones, (mala, male, malai for hill, neeru, neer, neelu and neer for water) used in the all the Dravidian languages appear similar. Therefore, it is likely that the main population groups of South India, perhaps began to dominate the landscape from the Mesolithic period. It is possible that the Dravidian speaking groups might have moved into this region during the Upper Palaeolithic or in the post-Upper Palaeolithic phase.

The diverse development of the Mesolithic communities in various parts of South India, and their subsequent migrations contributed to the population diversity in South India and the Southern Neolithic populations could be one group of Dravidian speakers. The textual and epigraphically records suggest that the hunters were a continuing reality in the medieval period. The

pastoralists were specialists and probably the hunters were raiding the pastoral groups for cattle, a practice that continued in the later period. This kind of cattle raid was very common even during the times of the Pallavas. When the label hunter was applied to certain populations as late as seventh century CE, it is quite conceivable that hunters existed during the Neolithic and Iron Age, and some of the burials could very much belong to the hunters.

## II. CONCLUSIONS

The composition and transformation of population groups in India from the prehistoric to early historical period are very crucial for understanding the developments in Indian history and the processes involved in the development appear to be much more complex than what is conceived or imagined by historians, archaeologists, and historical linguists. The perception of Indo-Aryan, Austro-Asiatic, and Dravidian and the associated populations and their migrations are based on several assumptions, some of which are colonially rooted. There may have been multiple waves of migrations of these groups into India that were separated by vast time intervals. An external cause for the excessive interest on the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian, rather than the Austro-Asiatic, could be associated with the contemporary socio-political interest of these two living linguistic groups.

The archaeological research on the later prehistoric and early historical periods needs to be planned systematically to understand this development. The fusion of three processes was most possibly responsible for the developments. The first is the development of population groups that were established in this region in the early period; the second is related to the movement of new groups, and the third is related to the interactions and relationships among these groups.

The main idea proposed here is that the microlithic hunter-gatherers, who were dispersed in South India, could have contributed to the population diversity of the Iron Age in South India and the descendants of the Neolithic stream of South India could be just one of the population groups during the Iron Age. There is all likelihood that the hunter-gatherer population groups adopted the material cultural elements such as iron, black and red ware, and other materials that came up in this period. What archaeologists refer to as Megalithic culture was not a single, monolithic group, but diverse groups occupying several ecological niches, but displaying identical material



culture of megalithic burials and black and red ware.

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