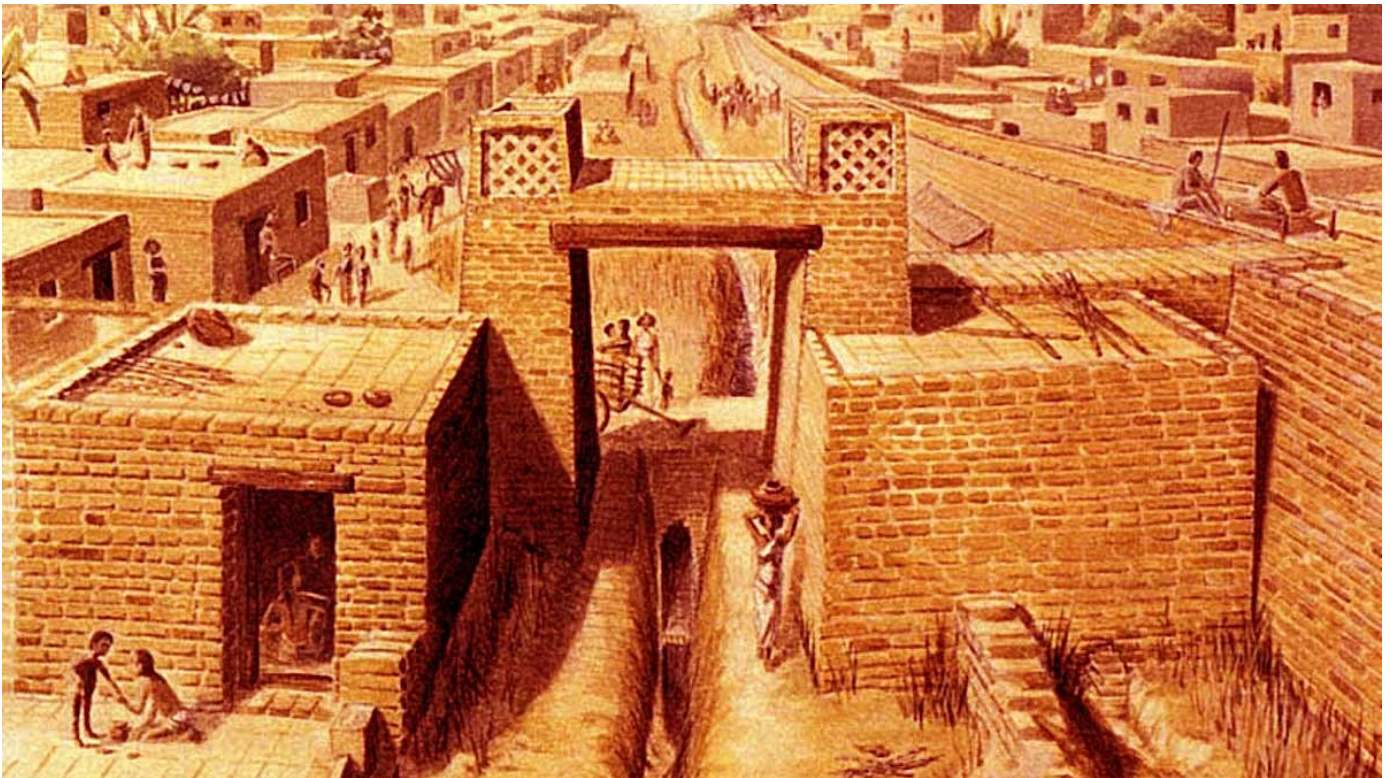


Aryans or Harappans—Who drove the creation of caste system? DNA holds a clue

In 'Indians', Namit Arora writes that scientists trace the earliest instances of endogamy in the subcontinent to the first millennium BCE.

[Namit Arora](#) 29 June, 2021 12:17 pm IST



An artist's rendition of Harappan civilisation | Wikimedia Commons

Harappan seals, pottery, figurines and animal bones reveal many real and mythical animals—dog, tiger, birds, wild ass,

'unicorn, humped bull, elephant, rhinoceros, water buffalo, short-horned humpless bull, goat, antelope, crocodile and hare'—but not horse, one-humped camel or donkey. The horse appears in the subcontinent *after* the collapse of the Harappan Civilization. It likely arrived in numbers along with the Aryans from Central Asia, a horse-riding nomadic–pastoralist people with perhaps some knowledge of crops. What also accompanied them was their language and religion: proto-Sanskrit, proto-Vedas and Vedic gods—mostly male gods, such as Indra, Agni, Mitra, Varuna, Rudra and Surya, and a few female gods, such as Usha and Prithvi. They used iron, revered fire and the cow (though they also slaughtered it and ate beef), and preferred cremating the dead. By the time these Aryan herders entered the subcontinent—in the middle centuries of the second millennium BCE—urban Harappans had largely dissolved into rural life.

Notably, the Vedic lore of the Aryans mentions defensive armour, weapons, chariots and warfare against dark-skinned foes named Dasas. But the Dasas were not Harappans, who no longer lived in fortified cities by the time the Aryans reached the Indus Valley. Based on the styles of Dasa forts described in the Rig Veda, Parpola and others have argued that the Dasas were proto-Sakas, a pastoralist group of the Central Asian steppes, and 'the major fights between the Aryans and the Dasas probably took place not in the Indus

Valley but in the Indo-Iranian borderlands, en route to the Indus Valley'. Nor does the description of the Saraswati River in the Rig Veda fit the Ghaggar-Hakra River that dried up c. 2000 BCE, and instead maps on to the river called 'Haraxvaiti (in Avestan) or Harahuvati (in Old Persian)', which is very likely the Arghandab River, or less likely the Helmand River, both in modern Afghanistan.

After the arrival of the Aryans to the Indus Valley, the locals (rural descendants of the Harappans) probably saw them as an aggressive bunch and their encounters were likely not all peaceful. One indicator of this is the very skewed genetic footprint of the Aryan male in later populations, despite the fact that, like all migrating groups, they had come with entire families. According to a scientific study in 2017, 'Genetic influx from Central Asia in the Bronze Age was strongly male-driven, consistent with the patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal social structure attributed to the inferred pastoralist early Indo-European society.' Further, while archaeologists haven't found any telltale signs of war or invasion, it's reasonable to expect that the locals would have initially resisted the imposition of the Aryan language, religion and culture, since that's how such encounters usually play out.

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The Aryans also brought with them a form of social hierarchy with priests at the top—a proto-varna system without endogamy (i.e., marrying only within a specific social group). They had no linguistic script and the need for it was reduced due to the lack of an urban civilization. The priests may also have impeded the rise of a script that might have democratized their oral chants and deflated their esoteric powers. Notably, such instincts seem alien to the Harappan ethos, given the ubiquity of the artefacts with their script on them. For instance, their script often appears as graffiti-like scribbles on stone blocks in non-elite parts of Dholavira, and as messages stamped on pottery items used by ordinary people (possibly brand or ownership details?).

After a millennium of mixing and migration in the subcontinent, numerous sites arose in the Gangetic Plain, whose settlers had learnt 'to fire a more durable and sophisticated series of ceramics known as painted gray ware (PGW)', writes historian Sudipta Sen. They evolved social formations 'in which clans, lineages, and tribes began to yield to new ruling councils and kings'. From this came new urban life, hybrid cultures, languages, pantheons and religio-spiritual ideas that we now associate with mid-first millennium BCE India. These developments had strong contributions from both the Aryan and the Harappan substrates. New political and social conflicts en route also

seem to have inspired many of the stories in the great epic Mahabharata.

Could the Harappan social hierarchy have included endogamy based on occupation, i.e., a proto-caste system? Did a hereditary group of manual scavengers clean the sullage jars of Dholavira homes? Current archaeology and genetics consider this unlikely (more ancient DNA analysis of Harappans may provide conclusive evidence). Scientists trace the earliest instances of endogamy to the first millennium BCE, probably more than a millennium after the Aryan migration into the subcontinent; mixing of populations was the norm until then. Thereafter, mixing coexisted with a few groups practicing endogamy, which eventually led to a more widely endogamous caste system.

But can we say which cultural substrate—the Aryan or the Harappan—drove the creation of the caste system? A strong clue comes from the fact that Aryan genes register far more strongly in the higher castes, who are also lighter skinned on average. Further, DNA evidence has shown that endogamy first appeared and became the norm 'among upper castes and Indo-European speakers'. Indeed, as many scholars have long argued, the roots of the Indian caste system almost certainly trace back to the Aryan substrate.

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Further, patriarchal practices like Sati, too, appear to be a legacy of the Aryan substrate. Sati's earliest noted occurrence in India dates to the fourth century BCE, as recorded by two first-century-BCE writers, Diodorus Siculus and Strabo. Though now mostly associated with India, sati also occurred back then in the Near East and Europe, among descendants of earlier migrants of the root proto-Indo-European culture, the Yamnaya—also the parent culture of the Indo-Aryans. In the fifth century BCE, Greek historian Herodotus wrote about a Thracian tribe where the 'most beloved wife' of a dead husband—deemed so by family and friends, and intended to be a coveted honour—was sacrificed and buried with him.

A century later, the Thracian wife of Philip II, father of Alexander the Great, was burned on her husband's funeral pyre, as per the custom of her people. In the first century CE, Roman historian Tacitus observed that in a Germanic tribe (descended from the Yamnaya), 'the wife refused to survive her husband, but killed herself in order to be burnt on the same funeral pyre as him'. He noted that many other tribes disliked widow remarriage. In the tenth century CE, Arab historian Al Masudi noted sati among Slavic and Russian tribes (also descended from the Yamnaya) in the Caucasus region and in India. Such funerary customs have a distinctly patriarchal script. They're qualitatively different from those

of ancient Egyptians, where servants were sometimes sacrificed and buried with an important man. Sati was likely alien to the Harappans, but in the mixed culture that arose later, it gained a foothold among the warrior elites and became part of the Indo- Aryan cultural legacy in the subcontinent.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, however, cultural chauvinism reared its ugly head in the scholarship of Indian prehistory. A host of Hindu nationalists and 'motivated scholars' (almost entirely brown or white Hindu men) began championing an alternative view of the Aryan migration, arguing that there was no Aryan migration at all! That the Aryans and the Harappans were one people, both 'fully indigenous'. They claimed that the proto-Indo-European language family, of which Sanskrit is a part, was created by these indigenous folks and taken to the west—the Out of India Theory (OIT). This also implied that the Harappans spoke proto-Sanskrit and codified it in their as-yet-undeciphered script, that they composed the Rig Veda, which describes their own fortified cities like Dholavira. Such bogus 'scholarship', as is now amply clear, has fed hordes of middlebrow Hindutva ideologues since the 1980s. Armed with little knowledge and misplaced pride, well-heeled urban Hindus began to confidently assert that the Aryan Migration Theory was 'discredited'. Countless websites carry this fake news.

In fact, the 'controversy' about Aryan migration was never an honest disagreement among scholars. Parpola, for instance, has long considered it 'impossible' that 'the Vedic Aryans were indigenous to South Asia'. The massive weight of evidence from linguistics, philology, and archaeology—though it had gaps that its rivals tried to exploit—has long favoured what's now being proven or refined by population archaeogenetics, a field whose impact on ancient history may end up being as significant as radiocarbon dating (1949).

The OIT was motivated by bad politics rather than by good scholarship.

This excerpt from 'Indians: A Brief History Of A Civilization' by Namit Arora has been published with permission from Penguin Random House India.