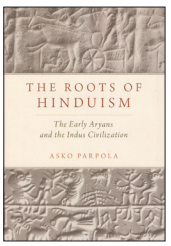

Asko Parpola, *The Roots of Hinduism: The Early Aryans and the Indus Civilization*

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The Roots of Hinduism is the fruit of some fifty years of research into the early history of India, research that has necessarily spanned the history, language, and culture of a vast expanse of regions west to Mesopotamia, and north-west to central Asia. It is a work of considerable and lasting importance, which will both inform and stimulate the field for decades to come. But the nature of its scope and vision, as well as its methodology, is such that some of its details, if not its conclusions, will inevitably attract specialists' criticism, and some will inevitably be refined by later scholarship. Nonetheless, we may state immediately that this work is required reading for any serious study of the issues with which it deals, and will demand serious consideration and reflection even by its critics. Only those misguided souls who cling to "the impossible hypothesis that the Vedic Aryans were indigenous to South Asia" (92) can fail to appreciate it, for it is a large nail in their coffin.

Asko Parpola participated in the famous recreation and recording of the Vedic fire sacrifice conducted by the Nambudri Brahmins in Kerala (at the initiative of Frits Staal). He is now Emeritus Professor of Indology and South Asian Studies at the University of Helsinki, and is known to us through an impressive corpus of articles—some 70 of which are listed here in the biography, which have principally examined, in forensic detail, the origins, beliefs, and practices of the Indo-European peoples in South Asia, and the vexed question of the identity and meaning of the Indus valley script, an issue on which no consensus exists.

Parpola's linguistic range embraces not only various forms of Sanskrit but also forms of Dravidian languages, such as Old Tamil. His methodology embraces both archaeology and historical linguistics, and it is unlikely that any relevant study, not the least written in Russian, has escaped his consideration. That breadth of expertise lends considerable authority to his conclusions when he moves from evidence to speculation, and while there is much here that we might consider proven, there is also much that is advanced as a thesis.

It is impossible in a short review to do justice to the range of scholarship in this work. But we might isolate his principal conclusions and historical narrative. The roots of Hinduism lie, according to this work, in the fusion of elements deriving from separate waves of Indo-European peoples with those of the Indus valley culture.

Speakers of Proto-Indo-European emerged from their early homeland in the Pontiac-Caspian steppes in southern Ukraine and southern Russia. It was in the south Ural-

ic Sintashta culture around 2100 BCE that the horse-drawn chariot first appeared, a technological leap that allowed its peoples military supremacy over their neighbors. A detailed route for the coming of the Aryan languages to Central, West, and South Asia is then traced through the correlation of archaeology with linguistics. Pushing east and reaching South Asia by around 1900–1700 BCE, one East Iranian-speaking group, whose principal gods were the Aśvins and Mitra-Varuṇa, succeeded the Bactria and Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC) culture that stretched to Baluchistan, Persia, and even Syria. Taking over some of BMAC traditions, notably fortified settlements, this group formed the Yaz-1 culture in the latter half of the second millennium BCE.

A second wave of Proto-Indo-European speakers, who adopted horse-riding around 1500 BCE, formed the Androvono culture on the steppes between the Urals and the Altai. By its mature phase, when it centered on southern Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and northern Afghanistan, the Androvono culture had contact with both Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley and its elites were speakers of Indo-Iranian. The Androvonans, steppe pastoralists whose main god was Indra, moved east toward the Indus valley some 500 years after their predecessors. In the lands that are now Waziristan and south-eastern Afghanistan, they encountered the settled first wave of the Yaz-1 culture, peoples identified here with the *Dasas*, *Dasyus*, and *Paṇis*, who are described in the Rig Veda as the inhabitants of fortified cities destroyed by Indra. Those city dwellers had, by this time, absorbed deities such as Rudra from the Indus civilization, along with aspects of the traditions that emerged in the Atharvaveda.

Parpola proposes that the subsequent collation of the Rig Veda was made by the wave of Indra-worshipping Indo-Aryans, with its early core, the hymns of the "family books" II–VII later augmented by books I and VIII–X. They represent the contribution of the earlier wave that emerges more fully in the later Arthavaveda, which reflects the blending of the Indra-worshipping wave with the earlier culture that had taken on ideas from the Indus civilization. He is, however, largely silent on how the two processes of cultural merger occurred or the context in which they happened.

He does, however, advance a significant new refinement to our understanding of migratory "waves" of eastward movement into the sub-continent and their consequent Sanskrit literary association, concluding that a third significant wave of Indo-Aryan immigrants entered South Asia following the stabilization of Vedic/Brahmanical culture in the powerful Kuru kingdom. He identifies this wave with a new group of Iranian language speakers, associated in the archaeological record with megalithic graves and Black and Red Ware pottery remains, who travelled via Sindh, Gujarat, and Rajasthan around 800 BCE and took over the Kuru kingdom. This enables him to propose "a wholly new interpretation of the Mahābhārata war" (145) and that this third wave of immigrants stimulated a new literary genre, being represented in the Mahābhārata by the Pāṇḍavas (with their subsequent takeover of Sri Lanka represented in the Rāmayāna).

In the second section of the book, Parpola turns to a closer examination of the Indus Valley culture, necessarily beginning with the debate over the language represented by its 400 or so signs—noting that there have been more than 100 published claims to have deciphered that script since the 1920s (27). He concludes that as with the other most ancient scripts, it is "logosyllabic" and that without a "Rosetta stone" it cannot be completely deciphered. But he argues that while it is too early to be an Indo-Aryan language, it must have left its mark on Vedic languages and, rejecting Michael

WITZEL's "Para-Munda" proposal (2005, 165), he concludes it is a proto-Dravidian language—more controversially, tracing among six examples of its mark on Vedic Sanskrit the word *oṁ*! Emphasising the importance of Old Tamil for the study of the Indus script in that it preserves archaic elements of Proto-Dravidian, he then advances a number of "translations" of Indus signs. To the non-specialist at least, some of these claims will seem tenuous, for example the otherwise apparently unsupported thesis that the sign of the grasping fig or *banyan* tree "could be a symbol for Rudra" (283). Nonetheless, his conclusions probably still represent the leading work on the subject.

This Indus-orientated section of *The Roots of Hinduism* does contain both a wealth of impressive scholarship and somewhat speculative claims for which available evidence is marshalled, rather than necessarily critically interrogated (albeit his footnoted articles often shed further light on these claims). Archaeological evidence that the Indus culture borrowed much from Mesopotamia rather than the reverse might, for example, have been problematized by a discussion of how ideas and goods may fail to leave an archaeological record rather than used to support a claim to west-east transmission. Similarly, while it is commonly suggested that the Indus civilization was ruled by Kings or Priest-kings (231), the claim is not proven, which problematizes the author's thesis that Vedic rites of kingship derived from Harappan royal rituals originally transmitted from West Asia.

The claim to connection between early sexualized rituals such as those of the early Vedic *vrātya*s and Tantrism, which in its fully developed form is much more than a millennium later, is particularly controversial (251), while the use of the similarly late Kālikā Purāṇa as evidence in discussion of the Indus culture is equally problematic—entirely different historical trajectories could be proposed to explain concordances. The same is true for any possible concordance between the Vedic Śambara and the much later Tantric deity Cakrasaṃvara. Such claimed transmissions over vast periods of time leave us with little alternative but to allow the rather unsatisfactory explanatory device of the "sub-stratum".

In emphasizing west-east migrations and transmissions, there are other possible formative influences on Hinduism that the author has chosen not to discuss. Given that many scholars assign them a role in the roots of Tantric ritual, one might wonder about the tribals, not least of the Himalayas, that engine of religious growth. Indeed, what of the *nāga*s, whose worshippers seem to form a pre-historic Pan-Asian religious understanding and whose watery homes should surely be factored into consideration of the significance of water bodies and sources in both Hinduism and the Indus Valley, with its famous bathing tanks. Parpola sees "folk religion" as descending from the Indus culture (as also Vedic cosmology and later yoga). But here again mono-directional agencies may be an oversimplification of ancient history.

Yet this is in its way a succinct work, advancing a complex series of explanatory models rather than exploring every possible option. It certainly does not claim to be the last work on the subject. Indeed, its aim is to stimulate further research, and it should achieve that aim. Its broad conclusions are immensely satisfying as an explanatory model, and while perhaps its utility is largely for the specialists who will engage with its conclusions for many years to come, it is written in a simple yet erudite style that should ensure that it is accessible to the advanced undergraduate.

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