

Appropriating the Past Language, Archaeology, and Ideology in South Asia

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Shaping history for nationalist or other ideological purposes has a long and sad history. 19th-century Europe witnessed the growth of an especially notorious instance of “massaged” history. The scholarly recognition that Sanskrit and most languages of Europe are related, descended from a common ancestor (“Proto-Indo-European”), and Schlegel’s claim (1808) that the Indo-European languages are superior to all others, including Semitic, set in motion the development of what Poliakov (1971) calls the “Aryan Myth” — the idea that not just in their language but in their “essential” characteristics, the Indo-Europeans, identified as “Aryans”, were superior to all others, especially the Jews. Only a few linguists, especially Pott (1856), spoke out against this misuse of linguistic prehistory.

Present-day South Asia witnesses a resurgence of attempts to reshape prehistory to suit ideological agendas. The debate again centers on the “Aryans”, this time defined as speakers of Sanskrit and its descendants. Groups that resent a perceived dominance of “Aryans” wholeheartedly embrace the linguistic hypothesis of an origin outside South Asia and interpret it to prove that “Aryans” conquered and subjugated the indigenous people. Various nationalist groups, including the virulently anti-Muslim Hindutva movement, just as emphatically reject this perspective and, in the interest of bolstering their view, reinterpret linguistic, archaeological, and general prehistory.

I discuss these arguments, their motivations, and their relative merits. The presentation is accompanied by numerous slides, especially of the Indus Civilization.