“We are like pizza. Early Indians were just the base’

For decades, we have been hearing about the Out of India Theory. But why is there not a single peer-reviewed research paper on it?

populations outside Africa are descend-
ed from a single Out of Africa migra-

tion. Between 7000 BCE and 3000 BCE the coming of Iranian agri-
culturists. Where some believe that the Harappans were Aryans, genetics offers something different. As Joseph says, “The Harappans were themselves a mix of the early Indians with the Iranian immigrants – it was their union, over cen-
turies, that created the Indus Valley civilisation.” You can see there were four significant migrations: the first Homo Sapiens; the Iranian agriculturalists; the East Asian influx of Austro-Asiatic lan-
guage speakers; and, around the same time, the “Aryans”.

Since I have decided to play devil’s advocate, I press him on the Out of In-
dia Theory (OIT) – the idea that the Aryans were Indians who fanned out in-
to other parts of Asia and Europe. Joseph laughs: he calls proponents of OIT not theorists but “denialists” of evi-
dence. “For decades,” he argues, “we have been hearing about OIT. But why is it all noise? Why is there not a single peer-reviewed research paper on OIT? Yes, there are blogs and websites, but there is no academic case made out co-
gently to support the denialists.”

The antiquity anxiety

OIT, Joseph, comes from an anxiety to place the Aryans in India before anyone else. What genetics shows, ho-
ever, is the opposite. “About 17.5% of Indian males today carry the R1a haplo-
group, which is also found in Europe,” he points out. “In an-
cient DNA evidence from 3200 BCE, this signature and this affinity to Central Asians is absent, but by 1200 BCE, you find it.” While the final report is not out, DNA extracted from a 4,500-year-old skeleton in Rakhigarhi, Haryana, con-

firms the trend: the R1a “Aryan gene” is absent and so is any evidence of a genetic link to Central Asians. In other words, if R1a did not exist in a 4,500-year-old Ha-
rappan but exists here today, somewhere in the middle someone new entered In-
dia. “It is simpler to speak of haplo-
groups, which concern a small part of the ancestry we carry,” says Joseph, “but even if you look at the complete genome data, the argument holds true.”

This is not necessarily surprising. There is archaeological evidence that the Harappans were phallic worship-
ners; those who prayed to the lingam. The Rig Veda, the oldest in the Vedic corpus, lambasts such people. In one 

verse, Indra defeats a city of phallic worshipping, elsewhere invoking Agni (fire) to: “Destroy with your heat the lovers of magic (the Dasyu enemies of

the Aryans are described as those who are anyavrata, of strange rites). Destroy with your power the evil spirits (for af-

ter all they are anivra, without Indra, and shishnadvra or phallic worship-

pers). Destroy with your flames the idol-

aters (for the Rig Veda venerate no idol). Burn to nothingness the murder-

ous scoundrels.” What is interesting, how-

ever, is that by the time we arrive at the later Vedas, such as the Yajur and Atharva Vedas, not only is idol worship normal, but even the phallic has be-

come sacred.

In other words, the Aryans came and at first did not like what they saw. But over the succeeding centuries, they merged with the Harappans, not only introducing their culture into India, but absorbing Harappan ideas into their own customs and imagination. (A little bit like later Islamic dynasties, one might mischievously add.)

Harappans weren't Aryans

Our conversation meanders into several other subjects: the Saraswati river, the links between Old Elamite and Drav-

i
dian languages, and the disintegration of Harappan culture. Indeed, the Harap-

pants were already in decline when the Central Asian immigrants began to knock at their doors. But on the dif-

ference between the Aryans and the Harap-

pants, Joseph is firm, armed not only with genes but history. It is telling he points out, that the “Vedas are of little use in deciphering the Harappan script, just as the imagery of the Harappan seals has little connection with the world of the Vedas.”

Where the Vedic texts elevate the horse to divine levels, the horse is con-

spicuous in its absence from Harappan seals. But for all that, Harappan invasions merged with the Aryans, even as it trav-

elled south and married itself to the world of the early Indians who lived there (thus creating “Dravidian” culture). The house with the central cour-
yard, the sacredness of the peepal tree, the lingam, the toilet lota, and even the tail of the thirsty crow that put pupils in a jugs – these are all bequests from our Harappan ancestors.

“In the end, whether it is culture or government, it all leads back to the pizza. The early Indians were the base. The Harappans, born from a marriage with Iranian immigrants, be-
came the topping. This is like the cheese and all the toppings: the Aryans, the Tibeto-Burmese, and the Austro-Asiatic language speakers. And it is together that they have created what we today define as Indian culture, and Indian identity.”

It is a fascinating picture, even if an unorthodox analogy. When we think of the story of the pizza that is Indian history and our place on it may fascinate many, there will be others who do not accept this, no matter what the evidence; some to whom India is not a pizza with mul-

tiple ingredients, but a pristine, imagined ideal, where everything is one, and nothing was ever born of difference.


Potpourri

The Harappans were themselves a mix of the early Indians and Iranian immigrants: Tony Joseph, special arrangement

60 MINUTES: WITH TONY JOSEPH

Thing are often not what they seem.” So proposes the first line in Tony Joseph’s Early Indians: The Story of Our Ancestors and Where We Came From. He would know, for a glance at the Amazon.in page that advertises his book is a lesson in how impressions can be manufactured even when they fly in the face of reality.

Of the 48 reviews posted on the e-commerce site, none of the dozen odd negative ones is from a verified buyer. And the assorted complaints range from Joseph’s alleged evangelical zeal to accusing him of plotting civil war. “Not worth a single penny,” declares Amit, while Ankur claims the author is inspired by Lord “maccully”.

A user called Dharma, meanwhile, makes a valourous attempt at nuance: “Traces of central Asia dna (sic) found in India’s genetic samples in India in no way proves Vedas originated outside of India or brought to India by outsiders (sic).” It is merely, insists another apoplectic user, “propaganda of leftist (sic) to disintegrate... and demean ancient Indian society.”

Where were the Vedas written

When I meet Joseph in New Delhi, I decide to inflict these comments on him, in a slightly less hysterical tone. “Are you even hinting that the Vedas originated outside India?” I ask, trying to mine the political before we get to the historical. “No,” he answers, between sips of filter coffee. Parts of the Rig Veda may have been composed in the far reaches of the subcontinent, but the bulk of the Vedic corpus was created in this land. “Is your argument that Hinduism is a foreign religion?” I demand, trying to play devil’s advocate while chewing on a chicken sandwich. “No,” again, is Joseph’s sage response. Hinduism was born from the interaction of migrants from beyond this land with the faiths(sic) already here, which in turn were nour-
ished by multiple outside influences from the ages before. “The Vedas and Hindusthemselves,” he reiterates, “are Indian.”

What he does, however, argue firmly – which is just as likely to provoke the unthinking minds that make up Internet mobs – is that India is not a single source culture. The Vedas, in simpler language for the Amits and Ankurs of Amazon, are Indian, but they are not the only or the earliest fount of Indian culture. India is, on the contrary, a con-
fluence of ideas and practices, synthe-
sised over thousands of years into this fascinating civilisational universe which we now call Hinduism.

We are the world

And, in what is the principal point of the book, we Indians ourselves are not chil-
dren of a single source. As has long been suspected, and as science is confirming of the latest findings. It is just as well, be-
cause it would open up a space for con-
spiracy theories and angry speculation instead of an engagement with facts. Still, I persuade him to give me his views. “Nobody,” he finally explains, “has any argument with the coming of the first Out of Africa humans to the subcontinent 65,000 years ago. Nobody has any issues with the East Asian origin of the Mundos. It is only when we speak of the migration from the Central Asian Steppes – of the so called ‘Aryans’ – that there is this sensitivity. And this comes from believing that everything Hindu, everywhere, must be Vedic and Aryan.” In other words, acknowledging an Aryan migration into India would puncture political ideologies built around notions of who belongs here and who does not. And this is precisely the kind of puncturing that would hurt.

What Joseph explains in Early In-
dians, then, is that Indian history is marked by several major influxes of pe-
ple. Leaving out archaic humans (who went extinct long ago but have left mate-
rial traces), and besides our African an-
cestors who first populated this land (all