

# Contested Past

## Anti-Brahmanical and Hindu nationalist reconstructions of Indian prehistory\*

Michael Bergunder  
Universität Heidelberg

### 1. *Orientalism*

When Sir William Jones proposed, in his famous third presidential address before the Asiatic Society in 1786, the thesis that the Sanskrit language was related to the classical European languages, Greek and Latin, and indeed to Gothic, Celtic and Persian, this was later received not only as a milestone in the history of linguistics. This newly found linguistic relationship represented at the same time the most important theoretical foundation on which European Orientalists reconstructed a pre-history of South Asia, the main elements of which achieved general recognition in the second half of the 19th century. According to this reconstruction, around the middle of the second millennium BCE, Indo-European tribes who called themselves *ārya* (Aryans) migrated from the north into India where they progressively usurped the indigenous population and became the new ruling class.

In colonial India this so-called “Aryan migration theory” met with an astonishing and diverse reception within the identity-forming discourses of different people groups. The reconstruction of an epoch lying almost three to four thousand years in the past metamorphosed, in the words of Jan Assman, into an ‘internalized past’, that is, through an act of semioticization the Aryan migration was transformed into a ‘hot memory’ in Levi-Strauss’s sense, and thereby into a ‘founding history, i.e. a myth’ (Assman 1992:75–77). This was

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\* An earlier version of this article, in German, was published in “Arier” und “Draviden”: *Konstruktionen der Vergangenheit als Grundlage für Selbst- und Fremdwahrnehmungen Südasians* ed. by Michael Bergunder & Rahul Peter Das (Halle: Verlag der Franckeschen Stiftung zu Halle, 2002), 135–180. I’d like to thank Will Sweetman for the English translation, and Susanne Prankel for further assistance.

possible above all because *völkische* (nationalistic) thought patterns, which were widely in vogue at the close of the 19th century, had exercised a lasting influence on the Aryan migration theory (Leopold 1970, 1974; Maw 1990; Trautmann 1997). One aspect particularly suitable to “identity presentation” (Lübbe 1977: 168) was the assumption that the hierarchical caste system (*varṇāśramadharmā*), as it is represented from a brahmanical point of view, was founded at that time, the migrating Aryans forming the upper three castes (*varṇas*) of the so-called twice-born (*dvija*) while those they had overthrown became Śūdras and outcastes.<sup>1</sup> It was above all through this construction that the Aryan migration theory became part of the colonial dominant discourse, which was reproduced as much by the Indian elites as by the British.

From this the British were able to derive an historical legitimation for their presence in India, to which the young Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) had already referred when, in 1847, in a very early essay, he remarked:

... it is remarkable to see, how the descendents of the same race to which the first conquerors and lords of India belonged, return ... in order to complete the glorious work of civilisation which their Aryan brothers left unfinished. (Müller 1847: 349)<sup>2</sup>

The influences of this way of thinking on the ideological foundation of colonial structures of domination in the second half of the 19th century has been repeatedly documented in subsequent research (Leopold 1974; Maw 1990: 19–74).

The representatives of the indigenous elites were either Brahmans or came from groups (*jātis*) which, almost without exception, could lay claim to a Dvija status. They thereby regarded themselves as direct descendents of the Aryan conquerors and the newfound “blood kinship” with the British rulers became an important element in their self-understanding. Under the conditions of colonial dependency the assumption of the common origin of Indians and Europeans in one race was received extremely positively by these elites. Thus Tapan Raychaudhuri reports the situation in Bengal:

The belief that the white masters were not very distant cousins of their brown Aryan subjects provided a much needed salve to the wounded ego of the dependent [Indian] elite. A spate of ‘Aryanism’ was unleashed. The Word

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1. On the particular formation of the caste system during the British colonial period, and on the difference between *varṇa* and *jāti*, see Bayly (1995, 1999: 126–138) and Dirks (2001).

2. On the significance of nationalistic thought in the works of the early Müller, see Leopold (1987) and also Trautmann (1997: 173–176).

'Aryan' began to feature in likely as well as unlikely places — from titles of periodicals to the names of street corner shops.<sup>3</sup>

Here it is particularly noteworthy, that the racial construction of Indian prehistory and its explanation of the caste system suited very well the claim to social and political leadership which the indigenous elites (as Dvijas) successfully stated *internally* within the colonial society, as the inferior status of the majority of the country's population (Śūdras and outcastes) was thereby traced back to events in the dim and distant past and thus achieved an historical legitimation.

Although this pattern of argument appeared at first sight ideal for the legitimation of British colonial rule and the self-understanding of the indigenous elites who depended upon them, in the course of time the discourse developed a dynamic which made it problematic for the rulers, while helping subaltern protest to be heard.

For the British the implied relationship with the Indian upper class had rather uncomfortable consequences, for it did not cohere with the racist prejudices of Victorian England, which were stoked particularly by the shock of the rebellion of 1857 (Maw 1990: 75–129). Neither did it suit the project of the Anglicization and Westernization of Indian culture of the Utilitarian-minded 'Anglicists', who became ever more influential (Leopold 1974: 409–410; Trautmann 1997: 117–130). As a result, in the course of the second half of the 19th century, alongside formal recognition of the Aryan migration theory, theories came to the fore which emphasized the intellectual and cultural inferiority of the Indians supported equally by racist arguments (corruption of the former Aryan nation through mixing with non-Aryans) and environmental factors (weakening of the intellect by the hot climate etc.) (Leopold 1974: 401–408).

When a national resistance movement against British colonial rule began to form within the Indian elite, here too the Aryan migration theory became problematic. The incentive for imagining a blood relationship with the English was lost, and the idea of a national-racial difference between Dvijas and Śūdras/outcastes rendered practically impossible a mobilization of the Indian masses for independence struggle. In response a tendency to minimize the supposed differences between Aryans and non-Aryans (i.e., between Dvijas and Śūdras/outcastes) became established. A typical example of this is Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902). Without denying an Aryan invasion, he put forward the view that

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3. Raychaudhuri (1988: 8, see also pp. 33–34). See also Leopold (1970).

the so-called 'Aryan Race' was itself a mixture of two races, the 'Sanskrit-speaking' and the 'Tamil-speaking', which he called the father and mother of the 'Aryan Race'.<sup>4</sup>

In the anti-colonial independence struggle, as it was led by Gandhi, in general those discourses which focused on concepts of a brahmanical Hinduism lost their significance. Thus the interest of the Dvija elites in the Aryan migration theory also mostly faded. Nevertheless this remained an important theme in identity-forming discourses, receiving much attention, above all in subaltern, anti-brahmanical liberation movements. There it was first adopted by J. Phule (see below), subsequently being incorporated into Indian Neo-Buddhism, Tamil Neo-Śaivism, the Dravidian movement and various Dalit religious groupings. However in extremist Hindu nationalist circles there was also great interest in early Indian religious history, which they sought to interpret to further their own interests. These developments will be dealt with in more detail in what follows.

## 2. *Anti-Brahmanism in Jotirao Phule*

The initial positive reception of the Aryan migration theory by Indian elites and its establishment as a dominant discourse meant at the same time a marginalization of the culture and traditions of all non-Dvijas in favour of the brahmanical-sanskritic "Aryanism". During the British Raj, however, economically and culturally influential groups had nevertheless established themselves, who did not at all traditionally regard themselves as Dvijas (such as, for example, the Vellalars and Chettis in the south), and from a brahmanical point of view counted as Śūdras (Bayly 1999: 32); also among representatives of the lowest layers of the population, who in the varṇa-classification counted as outcastes (*avarṇa*) and untouchables, an economically relatively prosperous, if tiny, class had established itself, mainly through employment in army service or as servants of Europeans, such as, for example, among the Paraiyars in the south or the Mahars in west India (Cohen 1969; Bayly 1999: 229, also Aloysius 1999 II. 4–5).

From these circles came a decisive protest against the idea of an Aryan-oriented interpretation of Indian pre-history. Instead a mutation was sought, by means of which the claim to leadership of the Dvija elite was rejected and an emancipatory identity asserted.

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4. Vivekananda (1991/1992 IV: 296, 301 [from the article "Aryans and Tamilians", 296–307]).

The first comprehensive reinterpretation of the Aryan migration theory may be traced back to Jotirao Govind Phule (1827–1890). Phule, who came from a Mali family near Pune in present-day Maharashtra, was one of the important Indian social reformers of the 19th century (e.g., Keer 1974, Omvedt 1976; O’Hanlon 1985). He built schools and orphanages, spoke out for equal opportunities in education for women, and fought determinedly against the social and political discrimination which was being justified by the varṇa system. The most important platform for his activities became the Satya Shodhak Samaj, founded in 1873. The same year saw the publication of Phule’s principal work, *Gulamgiri* (‘Slavery’), which contains the clearest formulation of the interpretive framework within which he understood the Aryan migration theory. The English preface to the book, otherwise originally written in Marathi, begins with the following sentences:

Recent researches have demonstrated beyond a shadow of doubt that the Brahmans were not the aborigines of India. At some remote period of antiquity, probably more than 3000 years ago, the Aryan progenitors of the present Brahmin Race descended upon the plains of Hindoostan from regions lying beyond the Indus, the Hindoo Koosh, and other adjoining tracts. (Phule 1991:I, p. xxix.)

In the subsequent comments Phule reveals familiarity with the results of contemporary Orientalist research, which had probably become known to him through his personal connections to Scottish missionaries, and in particular through reading John Wilson’s booklet, *India Three Thousand Years Ago* (Bombay 1858; cf. O’Hanlon 1985:141). The actual central points of his argument are, however, his own and are entirely oriented to the context of the Marathi-speaking area of western India:

The Aryan Brahmins established their own supremacy and domination over the original inhabitants here by conquering them in wars. The war-like Kshatriyās were enslaved and were given the pejorative name of “kshudra” (insignificant) — which later was corrupted into “Shudra”. (Phule 1991 II, 132 [from: ‘Advice to the Shudras and Ati-Shudras’])

The enemies of the Aryans, described in the Vedas and Purāṇas as *dasyu*, were identified by Phule as representatives of the indigenous population. Furthermore he subjects a large number of central episodes of the Hindu purāṇic mythology, in particular the first six avatāras of Viṣṇu (Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha, Narasimha, Vāmana, Paraśurāma), to a radical rereading and interprets them as evidence of a brahmanical conquest. Two such narratives were particularly

often brought up by Phule: the first the story of the Asura king Bali, whom he represents as a wise and just indigenous king, who falls in the struggle against the conqueror (the brahmanical dwarf!) Vāmana (e.g., Phule 1991 I, 13–21 [Gulamgiri, Part 6]). The other was Paraśurāma, described as a wicked brahmanical warrior king, who succeeds in extinguishing the last resistance of the Kṣatriyas (e.g., Phule 1991: I, 27–31 [Gulamgiri, Part 8]).

The ‘system of slavery’ (Phule 1991 I, p. xxxiv [from: Gulamgiri]) established as a consequence of the brahmanical conquest was, according to Phule, characterized not only by a serious physical but also a mental oppression. The Brahmins had denied the Śūdras any access to education, and had also forced them into ‘mental slavery’ (ibid. p. li) through the ‘pernicious fiction of the caste-system’ (ibid. p. l):

The Bhats [=Brahmins] invented an elaborate system of *caste-distinction* based on the way the other Shudrās behaved towards them, condemning some to the lowest rung and some to a slightly higher rung. Thus they permanently made them into their proteges and by means of the powerful weapon of the “*iniquitous caste system*”, drove a permanent wedge among the Shudrās... The Bhats created dissension among the depressed and the down-trodden masses and are battenning on these differences (are leading luxurious lives thereby).

In Phule’s interpretation the Brahmins and the Kṣatriyas are radically polarized, and the latter are equated with the defeated original inhabitants of the country, who were declared by the Brahmins to be Śūdras. This surprising construction may be understood only by looking at the contemporary social and political situation in the area of present-day Maharashtra. When the peshwa dynasty of Citpāvan Brahmins was finally defeated in 1818, the British victors set up Pratapsinh Bhosale, a direct descendant of Shivaji, as their vassal. The successors of Shivaji had in the end retained only the formal function at the court of the brahmanical peshwa rulers to install a new peshwa. In his reign of more than twenty years, Pratapsinh, with the support of the British, sought to restrict brahmanical influence in politics and government. To legitimate his rule, Pratapsinh initially claimed — just as Shivaji had — a Rajput origin for the Maratha elite and thereby Kṣatriya status for his family. This led to a fierce dispute with the Citpāvan Brahmins, who feared for their influence after the fall of peshwa rule and therefore argued that even the elite Maratha families could only be counted as Śūdras because, first, they did not observe the rites of the Kṣatriyas and, second, the Kṣatriyas as a caste had been destroyed under Paraśurāma (O’Hanlon 1985: 24–41). This conflict set off intense debate with the result that, following Pratapsinh’s example, a large section of agrarian

Maratha/Maratha-Kunbi communities<sup>5</sup>, who formed the dominant section of the population within the region, claimed for themselves at least a potential Kṣatriya status, while on the other hand the Brahmans declared them Śūdras.<sup>6</sup>

Against this background it is apparent why Phule made the contrast between Brahmans and Kṣatriyas/Śūdras the *leitmotif* of his argument. Certainly he left no doubt that even the so-called Untouchables could quite legitimately lay claim to be Kṣatriyas. They owed their particularly hard lot to the circumstance that even under Paraśurāma, as the last defenders of their homeland, they sought stubbornly, albeit unsuccessfully, to resist the Aryan invasion:

Parashuram forced those Maha-aris<sup>7</sup> whom he had defeated and captured as prisoners in the wars to take an oath to forswear warfare against the Brahmins (that they would never wage war in future against the Brahmins). He tied black cotton threads around their necks as mark of condemnation, and forbade their Shudra brethren even to touch them. Parashuram started the practice of calling the valiant Maha-ari Kshatriyas by such names as Atishudrās, Mahārs, Pariah, Māngs and Chāndals, and persecuted them in the most inhuman way, unparalleled anywhere in the world. (Phule 1991 I, 27–28 [Gulamgiri])<sup>8</sup>

Throughout his life one of Phule's most important concerns was to promote a sense of common collective identity — as Śūdras/“Ati-Shudras” — among the agrarian majority, explicitly including the Dalits (Omvedt 1976: 152; O'Hanlon 1985: 271). In hindsight, this attempt failed even within Phule's lifetime because of opposing vested interests. The Maratha elites for the most part saw no advantage in uniting their claim for Kṣatriya status with a Śūdra identity in Phule's sense.<sup>9</sup> Moreover the aspirations of many ambitious agrarian Jātis to be

5. On the question of the Maratha-Kunbis, see Omvedt (1976: 67–70); O'Hanlon (1985: 15–49).

6. So, for example, in the *Marathi Dnyan Prasarak* newspaper (September 1865) is found the following impressive evidence of brahmanical opinion: “If you look at the living conditions, the eating habits and the occupations of the Maratha people, it is very clear that they fall into two distinct groups: one superior varna, that of the Brahmans, and one inferior one, that of the Shudras.” (Quoted in O'Hanlon 1985: 41–42).

7. ‘Maha-ari’ in Marathi means ‘great enemy’, and for Phule provides an etymological explanation for ‘Mahar’, the name of the largest Marathi-speaking Dalit group (O'Hanlon 1985: 141n. 1).

8. Cf. O'Hanlon (1985: 146) and also Phule (1991 II, 77, 83).

9. Phule's attempt to characterize the Kṣatriyas as descendents of pre-Aryan agriculturalists apparently ran into resistance particularly among Marathas who defined their claim to be Kṣatriya on the basis of the (Aryan) varṇa system. In his work, ‘Shetakaryaca Asud’ (“The

counted as prestigious Marathas meant automatically a clear disassociation from the Dalits (Omvedt 1976: 116, 156–157, 187–189; O’Hanlon 1985: 303–305; Shinde 1985: 159–160). In the 1920s this part of the non-Brahman movement merged into the national independence movement (Omvedt 1976: 122, 204–206).

Nevertheless Phule’s ideas had a range of effects, the details of which are in part still unclear. For some time Phule’s work even found a direct continuation in the idiosyncratic anti-Brahman politics of Shahu Chatrapati (1874–1922), the Maharaja of Kolhapur (Omvedt 1976: 124–136; Kavlekar 1979: 53–74).

Moreover, several popular polemics which turned against Hindu-nationalist agitations, which in western India go back above all to the life and works of the Citpāvan Brahman B.G. Tilak (1856–1920), were inspired by Phule’s interpretation of the Aryan migration theory. While Phule hardly used the term ‘Hindu’ in his writings (Omvedt 1976: 108), some of his followers began to characterize the Śūdras/“Ati-Shudras” as true ‘Hindus’. Thus, for example, Mukundrao Patil (*Hindu ani Brahman* [“Hindus and Brahmans”], 1914), and Dinkarrao Javalkar (*Deshace Dushman* [“Enemy of the Country”], 1925), wrote that only the nonbrahmanical Marathi-speaking population constituted the real ‘Hindus’, while the Brahmans were strangers, who belonged to another religion and race (Omvedt 1976: 147, 156, 238–239).

As an autonomous Dalit movement began to establish itself at the beginning of the 20th century in western India, on the one hand it rejected Phule’s inclusivist model of identity; on the other hand, however, the emergence of this movement can also be regarded as a direct result of the efforts of Phule for the emancipation of the Dalits. For example Gopal Baba Walangkar, the first important Mahar leader, was closely connected for a long period with the Satya Shodhak Samaj and *Din Bandhu*, a newspaper sympathetic to the Samaj (Zelliot 1970; Omvedt 1976: 151–153; Keer 1974: 221–222). Ambedkar’s extremely high opinion of Phule should also be mentioned here (e.g., Keer 1974: vii). Omvedt even proposes the theory that Phule’s Śūdra/“Ati-Shudra” conception is largely reflected in the concept of ‘Bahujan Samaj’ (community of the majority), which

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Farmer’s Whip”), written in 1882–1883, but first published in full posthumously (1969), Phule sought to lessen this resistance. He now described the 96 families from whom the Marathas traced their descent also as immigrant Aryans. This migration had however been carried out entirely peacefully and 400 years before the conquering campaigns of the brahmanical Aryans. Furthermore just like the indigenous Śūdras/“Ati-Shudras”, the Kṣatriya-Aryans had put up resistance against the brahmanical conquerors (see O’Hanlon 1985: 264–265).



since about the 1960s has been used as propaganda by Indian politicians with leanings toward the Dalit movement.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. *Indian Neo-Buddhism*

A particular subaltern anti-Aryan discourse is to be found within those parts of the Dalit movement which have converted to Buddhism within the last hundred years. This phenomenon can be detected for the first time at the end of the 19th century among the Paraiyars in Tamil-speaking south India and is there inseparably connected with C. Iyothē Thass (1845–1914).<sup>11</sup> Iyothē Thass, about whose life only very little is known, came from the Coimbatore district, grew up in the Nilgiris, later lived in Madras and was a Siddha Doctor by occupation. He possessed a good knowledge of classical literary Tamil, and mastered the English language. He appears to have belonged to a Paraiyar elite which in the early years of the Raj achieved a certain degree of social advancement in different ways, be it as soldiers, as employees in medical services, as house-servants to Europeans, as employees in Christian missions, as mine-workers etc. The increasing brahmanization of colonial society at the end of the 19th century began to restrict such opportunities for social advancement and thereby counteracted the interests of this small Paraiyar middle class.

In 1898 Iyothē Thass and large numbers of those who shared his convictions converted to Buddhism and founded the Sakyā Buddha Society (*cākkaiya putta caṅkam*). This took place with the influential mediation of Henry Steel Olcott of the Theosophical Society, who set up the necessary contacts with Sinhalese Buddhists and subsequently greatly supported the Tamil Dalit Buddhists.<sup>12</sup> Iyothē Thass's justification of his conversion was that the Paraiyars had originally been Buddhists, and had constituted the original population

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10. See Omvedt (1976:157, see also pp.3–8).and Ilaiah (1996, vi–ix). See also the name 'Bahujan Samaj Party' (BSP) for the Dalit-oriented party founded by Kanshi Ram in 1984.

11. 'Iyothē Thass' is the most common English spelling. Alongside it are found also other versions, which apparently also go back to Iyothē Thass himself: C. Iyothē Doss, C. Iyodhi Doss and C. Iyothē Thoss. In Tamil his name is written K. Ayōttitācar (avarkaḷ) or K. Ayōttitāsa (paṇṭitaravarkaḷ) etc. Iyothē Thass and Tamil Neo-Buddhism have until today been little researched (see, however, Geetha & Rajadurai 1993; Geetha & Rajadura 1998:91–108; Aloysius 1998). The collected Tamil writings of Iyothē Thass have in the meantime been made easily accessible in a complete edition (Aloysius 1999).

12. The author of the present article is currently engaged in a project on the Theosophical Society in the scope of which, amongst other things, a closer study of Tamil Neo-Buddhism is planned.

of the country. Through the intrusion of the Aryan brahmanical conquerors, they had been robbed of their culture, their religion and their wealth and become destitute. Successful emancipation from brahmanical Hindu oppression should therefore be achieved by recollecting the supposed religion of their forebears.

In order to understand the background to this very idiosyncratic Paraiyar Buddhist reconstruction of the religious history of the Tamils the colonial context of South India must be considered. As Irschick has impressively demonstrated, a south Indian social system which idealized a settled agricultural population, socially and religiously centred upon local village communities, was created during the period of colonial rule in the 19th century as a ‘heteroglot and dialogic production’ of British colonial rulers and foreign missionaries, Indian pandits and other indigenous interested parties (Irschick 1994:6). The population was thereby ‘fixed’ in a ‘resacralized land’ (Irschick 1994:1). In the course of this development the individual villages received a new cultural identity, legitimized mainly through the construction of a supposed millenia-old past. Using the example of the region *toṅṭaimaṅṭalam* south of Madras, Irschick shows how since the start of the 19th century efforts were made to present the Vellalars as cultivators and landholders since time immemorial (Irschick 1994: esp. 100–109). In the second half of the 19th century the wretched situation of the Paraiyars came especially into focus, and in the course of administrative attempts to improve their lot, statements which describe the Paraiyars as ‘disinherited sons of the earth’ are found again and again in official documents and reformist tracts (Irschick 1994:153–190). This new definition of the Paraiyars is first found in a text of Francis Whyte Ellis (c.1778–1819) from the year 1818, in which he writes that the Paraiyars in *toṅṭaimaṅṭalam* “affect to consider themselves as the real proprietors of the soil”.<sup>13</sup> By 1894, to the Wesleyan missionary William Goudie (1857–1922) the Paraiyars are self-evidently the “disinherited children of the soil”.<sup>14</sup> In 1909 Edgar Thurston (1855–1935) summarized colonial knowledge as follows:

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13. F.W. Ellis: *Replies to seventeen Questions proposed by the Government of Fort St. George relative to Mirasi Right with two appendices elucidatory of the subject* (Madras 1818), Appendix. Quoted in Irschick (1994:182).

14. W. Goudie, “The Pariahs and the Land”, *Harvest Field*, 15 July 1894, 490–500, p.493. Quoted in Irschick (1994:182).

The facts taken together, seem to show that [...] the Paraiyans as a race [...] are very ancient, [...] The institution of the *parachēri*<sup>15</sup> points to original independence, and even to possession of much of the land. If the account of the colonization of Tondeimandalam [*tonṭaimaṅṭalam*] by Vellālans in the eighth century A. D. is historic, then it is possible that at that time the Paraiyans lost the land, and that their degradation as a race began. (Thurston & Rangachari 1909 VI, 88–89)

The conception of the Paraiyars as the oldest inhabitants of the south appears soon to have become linked with the Dravidian idea which had rapidly found wide dissemination since the first appearance of Robert Caldwell's (1814–1891) famous *Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian* (London, 1856).<sup>16</sup> In this sense the Wesleyan pastor John Ratnam founded the newspaper 'Dravida Pandian' (*tirāviṭa pāṅṭiyaṅ*) in 1885 and, a year later, a Dravidians' Association (*tirāviṭār kaḷakam*) (Aloysius 1998: 49, 55). There is evidence that Iyothee Thass was in close contact with John Ratnam at this time. In 1891 Iyothee Thass himself founded a Paraiyar union of his own in the Nilgiris, the Dravidian Assembly (*tirāviṭa capai*) (Aloysius 1999 I, p. 185), whose activities are known to us through, for example, a written list of demands which demanded among other things access for Dalits to the education system, to public office, and to public wells and ponds (Aloysius 1999 I, 184–185; II. 4–5). It was probably also the circles around Iyothee Thass that claimed the description 'Urdravidian' (*ātītirāviṭār*), still a common synonym for Paraiyars in South India.<sup>17</sup>

Further clues to establishing the connection of the idea of the Paraiyars as the original inhabitants of South India with the assumption of an original adherence to Buddhism may be found in contemporary discussions. First, it is clear that Iyothee Thass examined very critically the religions existing in his

15. *paraiccēri* = a name for separate Paraiyar settlements outside the villages — M. B.

16. In what follows 'Dravidian' instead of 'Tamil' will be used where the Tamil nationalist reconstruction of supposed cultural traditions etc. is intended.

17. From a note by the Leipzig missionary Johannes Kabis (1853–1919) it appears probable that in 1895 Iyothee Thass founded in Madras the "People's Assembly of Urdravidians" (*ātītirāviṭa jaṅa capai*), which probably split off from the Parayar Mahajana Sabha founded by R. Srinivasan in 1892. See Kabis (1900: 70–71) — I thank Andreas Nehring for bringing Kabis to my attention, but also Aloysius (1998: 49). In Aloysius (1999 I. xxiv, 191) it is stated that the *ātītirāviṭa jaṅa capai* already had this name at its foundation in 1892. These statements perhaps refer, however, to the organization of R. Srinivasan. If so, Iyothee Thass would be the first to introduce the concept *ātītirāviṭa* into political discussion. In the 1920s and '30s Ramasami ensured the wide dissemination of the term.

surroundings. In 1892 he demanded of the Madras Maha Jana Sabha free access for Paraiyars to the great Hindu temples and as a result experienced the massed resistance of the Brahmans and Vellalars (Aloysius 1999 I, 79–81). It was surely in part because of experiences like this that Iyothee Thass regarded emancipation for Dalits within Hinduism as impossible. In a letter from 1893, however, he also explicitly rejected as alternatives conversion to Christianity or to Islam, as caste differences persisted in Indian Christianity and the severe social backwardness of contemporary Muslims made conversion to this religion unattractive as an emancipatory strategy (Aloysius 1999 II, 1–8).

By contrast, in the 19th century there were no Buddhists in South India, and the religion was practically unknown. In the second half of the 19th century, however, a number of very committed Tamil intellectuals began to assemble and to publish the ancient classical literature which had fallen into oblivion (Zvelebil 1992: 144–222). As we can gather from the diary of one of the leading representatives of this group, U. V. Swaminatha Iyer, the Tamil text ‘Manimekalai’ (*maṇimēkalai*) aroused particular interest (Swaminatha Iyer 1990/1994: 525–528). Manimekalai is an old Buddhist epic, which was printed in two editions independent of each other in 1891 and 1898, thereby awakening an interest in the Buddhist traditions of the Tamils. Moreover, following the rediscovery of the classical literature, there was a new appreciation of the ‘Tirukkural’ (*tirukkural*), an important collection of ethical aphorisms, of which very early initial English and German translations had already appeared. In 19th-century Orientalist research the Tirukkural was widely assumed to go back to a Buddhist author. Thus Karl Graul (1814–1864) had already by 1855 characterized the Tirukkural as ‘a work of Buddhist hue.’<sup>18</sup> In this connection it was then of particular interest that Tiruvalluvar, the author of the Tirukkural was identified as a Paraiyar in Tamil tradition (as, incidentally, were also other famous ancient Tamil writers, e.g., Auvaiyar; cf. Pope 1886: i–ii, x–xi). The Theosophical Society, which had a strong Buddhist character in the decades following the official conversion of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) to Buddhism in Ceylon in 1880, of course also ensured publicity for Buddhist teaching.

The central component of Iyothee Thass’s argument is a radical reinterpretation of the Aryan migration theory. As Aryan conquerors from the north,

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18. Karl Graul, *Reise in Ostindien* (Leipzig 1855) vol. IV, p. 193, quoted in (Nehring 2000: 77). It should be noted that Graul could have been subsuming the Jains also under the name of the Buddhists (Graul 1865: xi note).

described by Iyothee Thass as Aryan Mlecchas (*āriyarākiya milēccarkaḷ*) or Persians (*purucikarkaḷ*), advanced into the south, the Dravidian Paraiyars were humiliated and their Buddhist religion systematically destroyed. The Aryan Mlecchas began to impose their law, their religion and their culture on the Dravidians. According to Iyothee Thass, the attempt by the Aryan interlopers to displace Buddhist doctrine and teachers through cunning deception and to erect a caste system turned out to be especially perfidious and consequential.

Apart from the fact, that the Aryan false Brahmans came here from Persia, settled, and supported themselves by begging, taking the Buddhist stories and deeds as a basis, they simplified and augmented the Buddhist Dharma wherever they saw fit, to form the religion of Śiva and the religion of Viṣṇu. Whereas the intelligent wise [of Buddhism]... rejected this, as soon as the uneducated people and the greedy kings heard the terms of the Buddhist Dharma and related deeds they believed this also to be the true Buddhist Dharma. Like sheep, who trust their slaughterer, they hurried after. The people of the land at that time took the wisdom of the lying Brahmans for the truth and began to follow them [...]. As soon as awareness of the true knowledge of the noble Buddhist laity disappeared, the Chandalas, Tiyars and Paraiyars were held to belong to the lower castes [...] the true Dharma was destroyed, and those who were full of untruth, filthy speech and bad conduct spread. (Aloysius 1999: I. 665 [*intirar tēca carittiram*]).

For Iyothee Thass, this historical situation explains the irreconcilable enmity between the Brahmans and the Paraiyars:

It can easily be seen that from the beginning until the present day there rules a sort of enmity between the Persians called Brahmans and the Buddhists called Paraiyars [...] the Buddhists' whole historical tradition was destroyed because the Persians at that time came here as enemies of the Buddhists, abused the Buddhists with 'Paraiyar, Paraiyar' and subjugated them so that they could not develop. (Aloysius 1999 II. 23, 25 [*puttar ennum iravu pakalarra oḷi*, ca.1899]).

The emancipation of the Paraiyars therefore entailed for Iyothee Thass a comprehensive reconstruction of the destroyed Tamil Buddhist tradition. For this reason he attempts to interpret practically the whole of classical Tamil literature as Buddhist textual remains. Thus, for example, he claimed that the name of the Tirukkural, mentioned above, was originally derived from *tirik-kuraḷ* (*tiri* "three", Skt. *tri*), for it actually belonged to the Pali canon, the so

called ‘three baskets’ (*tripitaka*).<sup>19</sup> He also attributed virtually every Tamil Hindu festival and custom to a Buddhist origin.

This rereading of Tamil history and culture is carried out extremely comprehensively and in great detail. Iyothée Thass thereby exposes a glorious Buddhist past of the Dravidians and attempts to create a ‘collective memory’<sup>20</sup> and thereby a collective identity for the Paraiyars, hitherto people without a history.<sup>21</sup> Tamil Dalit Buddhism had only a short heyday (Ahir 1992: 148–151; Aloysius 1998: 80–104). Its radical reconstruction of Indian religious history remained, however, a recurrent motif within Indian Neo-Buddhism, and its great influence on the Dravidian movement is also apparent.

The real renaissance of Buddhism in India only came about with the work of B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), who came from a Mahar family and was not only one of the leading Indian politicians of his time but at the same time also the most active advocate for an autonomous Dalit movement.<sup>22</sup> As early as 1935 Ambedkar publicly contemplated the idea of achieving the emancipation of the Dalits by conversion from Hinduism to another religion. It was, however, not until 1956, that under his leadership a mass conversion to Buddhism actually took place, as a consequence of which a living Indian Dalit Buddhism emerged.

It is difficult to be sure whether Ambedkar was familiar with Iyothée Thass and his teachings, but it can be taken for certain that he did know of Tamil Dalit Buddhism (Aloysius 1998: 187–189). Even if no direct literary dependence can

19. See, e.g., Aloysius (1999 II, p. 568): *tiruvalluva nāyaṇār iyarriya tirikkuraḷ*. He made a similar argument for, e.g., *tiruvācakam* and *tirumantiram*.

20. On the concept of a ‘collective memory’, see Assmann (1992).

21. From time to time in Iyothée Thass extremely modern figures of speech in a certain sense reminiscent of current debates on Orientalism can be found in his anti-brahmanical polemic. Thus it is for him quite apparent that Hinduism and its textual foundation are a recent product of British colonial rule: ‘[...] it is evident, that exactly at the time that the noble English appeared as British government officials and asked, what the holy scriptures (Vedas) of the Hindus were, [something] was written down by many people in different ways, in order to hand [the result] over to them. Therefore is it clear, that the English epoch with the British government is the cause for the composition of Vedic stories and the production of the Veda in the form of a book, and can be described as the time of origin of the Veda of the false Brahmins.’ (Aloysius 1999 II, p. 86, *tamiḷan*, 29. April 1908). ‘It took at most a period of a hundred years, for the Veda of the false Brahmins, written by a few false Brahmins, given to Europeans and put by them into book form as soon as they had obtained it, to be published as “Veda”.’ (Aloysius 1999 I, p. 153, *tamiḷan*, 12 May 1909). See, e.g., also Geetha & Rajadurai (1998: 98–99).

22. On Ambedkar, see Keer (1971) and Jaffrelot (2000).

be proven, nevertheless a remarkable echo of Iyothee Thass can be found in Ambedkar's remarks on the origin of untouchability (Ambedkar 1989b). Ambedkar presupposes that in the past it was often the case in tribal conflicts that the survivors of the defeated people were uprooted and forced to serve the victors. These people, whom Ambedkar called 'Broken Men', were not integrated into the village community and remained marginalized. They became the untouchables of brahmanical Hinduism because they had become true followers of Buddhism and, in contrast to most others, were not prepared to give up their religion again after the renewed victory of brahmanical Hinduism:

The Broken Men hated the Brahmins because the Brahmins were the enemies of Buddhism and the Brahmins imposed untouchability upon the Broken Men because they would not leave Buddhism. On this reasoning it is possible to conclude that one of the roots of untouchability lies in the hatred and contempt which the Brahmins created against those who were Buddhists. (Ambedkar 1989b:317).

Ambedkar saw a further reason for untouchability in the Brahmins' attempt to fight Buddhism through the introduction of strict vegetarianism. According to Ambedkar, while Indian Buddhism strictly rejected brahmanical animal sacrifice, it allowed meat-eating (Ambedkar 1989b:346–347):

To my mind, it was strategy which made the Brahmins give up beef-eating and start worshipping the cow. The clue to the worship of the cow is to be found in the struggle between Buddhism and Brahmanism and the means adopted by Brahmanism to establish its supremacy over Buddhism. (Ambedkar 1989b:345)

On the basis of these reflections Ambedkar believes it is possible to date precisely the emergence of untouchability as an institution. He locates its beginning about 400 CE, as Buddhism in India slowly lost its power (Ambedkar 1989b:379). While this interpretation of the emergence of untouchability is in many respects reminiscent of the ideas of Iyothee Thass, there are nevertheless significant differences which should not be overlooked. Ambedkar strictly rejected any racial interpretation of the Aryan migration theory, which is why for him, for example, the Śūdras too are former Kṣatriyas who were socially degraded through a conflict with the Brahmins,<sup>23</sup> and certainly not the descendents of the original Dravidian inhabitants. In explanation of his rejection he refers to the brahmanical appropriation of this Orientalist construction:

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23. See the summary of the theory in Ambedkar (1989a:204.)

The Brahmin believes in the two-nation theory. He claims to be the representative of the Aryan race and he regards the rest of the Hindus as descendants of non-Aryans. The theory helps him to establish his kinship with the European races and share their arrogance and their superiority. He likes particularly that part of the theory which makes the Aryan an invader and conqueror of the non-Aryan native races. For it helps him to maintain and justify his overlordship over the non-Brahmins. (Ambedkar 1989a: 80)

Accordingly, in Ambedkar we find a subaltern interpretation of Indian religious history, which refrains from any direct reference to the Aryan migration theory and is exclusively oriented toward the Dalits. Later proposals originating from Indian Dalit Buddhist circles appear to have resulted in more comprehensive interpretations. Thus Swapan Kumar Biswas (b.1947), a Bengali follower of Ambedkar, produced a detailed and influential reinterpretation from a Buddhist point of view of prehistoric and early India.<sup>24</sup> According to Biswas, the Aryan conquerors, whom he characterized as “Aryan Brahmins” (Biswas 1999: 5, 9), constituted numerically only a small group (Biswas 1995: 175). After their successful invasion, they forbade the conquered every sort of literary activity and out of the language of the indigenous people, namely Prakrit, they developed an artificial language, Sanskrit (Biswas 1995: 35; 1999: 56). Although the Aryans sought to erase all evidence of the culture conquered by them, for Biswas it was nevertheless possible to make some statements about it. The pre-Aryan inhabitants of India were for him the ‘Assuras’ mentioned in the Vedas, who were at the same time the representatives of the Indus Valley Civilization, which he therefore described as the “Indian Assura Civilization” (Biswas 1999: 58). The core of his theory, however, consisted in his interpretation of this Indian Assura civilization as casteless and Buddhist:

[...] it has become quite obvious that in the pre-Vedic period our countrymen followed a faith which goes down to the ages as Buddhism. [...] Yet Buddhism declined in India. It seems to have been destroyed by the invading Aryans along with the opulent cities of Harappa, Mohenjodaro in which it grew into maturity. [...] The native people of India, who believed in the doctrine of liberty and equality, continued their struggle for their independence. Eventually Buddhism emerged as a major religious and social force, once again during 6th–5th century B.C. with the advent of Prince Siddharth, ... (Biswas 1999: 155, 157, 158)

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24. See Biswas (1995, 1998, 1999). On Biswas, see also Das (2002: 202, n. 44.)



According to Biswas Siddhartha Gautama stands in a tradition of predecessors and thus can in no way be seen as the founder of Buddhism (Biswas 1999:64–80). His attempt to revive Buddhism in India eventually fell victim to a renewed brahmanical resistance and thus remained only episodic (Biswas 1999:301–337) until at the end of the 19th century Buddhism once again experienced a further revival.

By contrast with other prehistorical reconstructions, Biswas's remains curiously vague when it comes to the fate of the conquered. The Assura civilization is described as extremely peaceable; they had nothing to match the militant Aryans and their wicked intrigues (Biswas 1995:81–102). As the Aryan conquerors in reality had been only a small number of Brahmans, according to Biswas the Kṣatriyas are former collaborators from the indigenous people who had fought on the side of the conquerors (Biswas 1998:60–61). The 'untouchables, Shudras and Adiwasis' are for Biswas in general 'the descendents of the valiant Assura race who ruled the pre-Vedic India' (Biswas 1998: 106; emphasis removed: M.B.). Statements about the emergence of social differentiation among these non-Aryans remain inconsistent. For the most part Biswas speaks only in general terms of "touchable and untouchable Shudras" (Biswas 1998:54). They were those who had determinedly fought against the Aryan interlopers, and some of these Śūdras were enslaved by the Aryans and thereby became untouchables (Biswas 1998:60–61). Elsewhere, however, the untouchables are described as those who had already been slaves in the Assura culture (Biswas 1995:217–218).

Biswas's argument was above all aimed at the mechanisms of oppression of Brahmanism and Hinduism, which he describes as "a religion of foreign origin" (Biswas 1999: 10, 13–25). A supposed idyllic society before the conquest and resistance to the brahmanic invasion is only hinted at. His representation thereby differs in certain respects from most other subaltern reinterpretations of the Aryan migration theory, as presented here. Nevertheless Biswas's proposal shows that reinterpretations of the Aryan migration theory are still today very widespread among representatives of Indian Neo-Buddhism.

#### 4. *Tamil Neo-Śaivism*

The Aryan migration theory undergoes a quite idiosyncratic Dravidian interpretation in the circles of Tamil Neo-Śaivism.<sup>25</sup> Apart from a few precursors, as for example the Śaivite reformer Ramalinga Pillai (1823–1875),<sup>26</sup> it was above all the Śaiva-Siddhānta movement at the end of the 19th century and the start of the 20th century as well as the works of Maraimalai Adigal *alias* Vedachalam (1876–1950) which shaped Tamil Neo-Śaivism.<sup>27</sup>

The vast majority of those who supported and propagated Tamil Neo-Śaivism were Vellalars and related *jātis*. As already outlined above, in the 19th century the Vellalars were regarded as the supposedly hereditary cultural pillars of the traditional Tamil agrarian society. The intellectual core of Tamil Neo-Śaivism consisted now in the idea that the Vellalars represented the true heirs and protectors of the Tamil tradition, and that the Tamils had already in prehistoric times been adherents of a monotheistic Śaiva religion. In the rhetoric of this discourse the reference to Vellalars is mostly not made explicit, but the context shows clearly that when Tamil Neo-Śaivites spoke of ‘Tamils’ (or more seldom also ‘Dravidians’<sup>28</sup>), they had in mind above all Vellalars. This can be well illustrated using a book very often cited in these circles.<sup>29</sup>

In Kanakasabhai’s *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago* (1904), it is explained that among those pure Tamils who in the classical Tamil society did not live apart from society as ascetics (*aṛivar*) the Vellalar occupied the “highest

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25. In what follows only South Indian Neo-Śaivism will be discussed. The Śaivite renaissance on the Jaffna peninsula, which is inseparably connected with the name of Arumuga Navalar (1822–1879), cannot be entered into here (but see Hudson 1992a,b). Between the two there are many parallels and mutual influences. Regarding the historical construction they are nevertheless differentiated from one another in that it is my impression that anti-brahmanical rhetoric is hardly found in the Jaffna version.

26. See Irschick (1994: 196–197). On Ramalinga Pillai, see also Dayanandan Francis (1990).

27. The Śaiva-Siddhānta movement has hitherto been only insufficiently researched. On the biography and works of Maraimalai, which likewise still await detailed scholarly investigation, see, e.g., Nambi Arooran (1976: 309–396, an excerpt from an as yet unpublished dissertation); Ilangumaran (1995), Ramaswamy (1997: 215–219).

28. Unlike Iyothee Thass or the Dravidian movement, in the circles of Neo-Śaivism the description ‘Dravidian’ was mostly avoided and Tamil preferred instead. See already Nallasami Pillai & Ramanan (1897–1914 II, p. 5 [October 1898], 109–113 [from Nallasami Pillai, *Ancient Tamil Civilization*]).

29. See Maraimalai Adigal (1958). Unfortunately, I have not yet been able to consult this book.

position” and represented the “nobility, or the landed aristocracy”.<sup>30</sup> For Dalits this means that, according to this account, they were discriminated against even in the golden age of Tamil society:

When men of the higher classes passed in the streets, the lower classes made way for them. The Pulayan or scavenger on meeting a nobleman bowed before him with both his hands joined in a posture of supplication. (Kanakasabhai 1904:114)

If the Neo-Śaivites wanted to restore the Tamils to their former dominant cultural influence, then behind this lay the idea, mostly unspoken, that this was also connected with reclaiming cultural and religious leadership for the Vellalars. Support for the Dalits in Tamil Neo-Śaivism was mostly restricted to the demand, common also in Brahman circles, for programmes for the “elevation of the depressed classes”.<sup>31</sup>

The primary target of Tamil Neo-Śaivism was the version of history prevalent in south Indian intelligentsia at the end of the 19th century:

Did we not all read in our schooldays that the Tamilians were aborigines and savages, that they belonged to a dark race, [...] whom the mighty civilising Aryans conquered and called Dasyus, and that all their religion, language and arts were copied from the noble Aryans.<sup>32</sup>

In this version of history the Neo-Śaivites saw discrimination against Tamil culture, brought about by south Indian Brahmans appropriating Orientalist constructions of history in order to assert an Aryan-brahmanical superiority over Tamil culture. A typical example of this sort of account, to which the critique of the Neo-Śaivites referred, are the *Tamil Studies* (1914) of Srinivasa Aiyangar,<sup>33</sup> in which is stated:

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30. Kanakasabhai (1904:113–114). See also the remark of P. Sundaram Pillai, who on 19 Dec. 1896, in a letter to J.M. Nallasami Pillai, described the Vellalars as the ‘flower of the Dravidian Race’ (Nallasami Pillai & Ramanan 1897–1914: II.5 [October 1898], p. 112).

31. See, e.g., Nallasami Pillai & Ramanan (1897–1914 XI, p.6 [December 1910]), p.271 (from: *The Fifth Annual Report of the Saiva Siddhanta Conference submitted by the Standing Committee*, 262–272).

32. Nallasami Pillai & Ramanan (1897–1914 VII, p. 1 [April 1906]), p.29 (from an editorial by Nallasami Pillai).

33. Further examples include Swaminatha Aiyar (1975), a collection of essays, written for the most part in 1922–1923: ‘What is known as Dravidian civilization is really the civilization of Aryan and Aryanized immigrants from the North.’ (p. 126); ‘... there is therefore no reason

[...] it is evident that the whole Tamil literature is permeated with Aryan influence and that practically there was no literature worth the name among the Tamils before the migration of Brahmans to South India. (Srinivasa Aiyangar 1914: 195)

Moreover, for Srinivasa Aiyangar the Tamils were originally not Śaivites at all but primitive animists, until the Brahmans came to South India as teachers and imparted their religion and philosophy to the Tamils (Srinivasa Aiyangar 1914, esp. pp. 186, 215). The Neo-Śaivites energetically contradicted this Brahmanical view of history, which was at the time very influential in south India. Central to the debate was the journal *Siddhanta Deepika*, published in Madras from 1897 to 1914. Numerous contributions toward a new interpretation of the Aryan migration theory are to be found in this journal of the Śaiva-Siddhānta movement.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless the Vellalar background and the Neo-Śaivite orientation hindered a radical subaltern rereading like that of, for example, Iyothée Thass. Instead a complex model of Tamil superiority was developed around the claim that the Tamils were the original inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent.<sup>35</sup> Contrary to the Brahmanical view of history, the Neo-Śaivites held that the numerically few immigrant Aryans were entirely without culture and owed their own linguistic, cultural and religious traditions entirely to contact with the

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to suppose that the Dravidian languages were once spoken throughout India.' (p.540); 'Archaeology says that when the Aryans penetrated into Southern India, they found the country inhabited by men in the neolithic stage of culture.' (p. 542). And Krishnaswami Aiyangar (1923: 1): 'History begins for India with the coming of the Āryans into the country. It may be said with almost equal truth that the history of South India [...] begins with the coming of the Āryans into the South.'; [...] these references [...] indicate an immigration of the Brahman in times much anterior, and the character of Brahmanism of which we gain glimpses in this literature shows itself to be pre-Buddhist.' (p.48). In addition there were, however, also mediating Brahmanical voices, like that of Sesha Iyengar (1925), who was ready to accept the existence of an independent, pre-Aryan, elevated Dravidian culture. This had combined with the Aryan culture to form the 'mixed civilization' which characterizes India, although the latter was still the 'guiding spirit' (p. 121).

34. See, e.g., Nallasami Pillai & Ramanan 1897–1914 II, p.5 (October 1998), 109–113 (Nallasami Pillai, "Ancient Tamil Civilization"); V.5 (September & October 1901), 73–74 ("Prof. Sundaram Pillai on the History of the Religious Sects in Southern India"), 78–81 ("D. Savariroyan: Some Disputed Points cleared"); IV.5, 104–108 and V.7, 157–161 and in other places ("D. Savariroyan, The Admixture of Aryan with Tamilian"); V.11 (April 1902), 168–173 ("V.J. T. Pillai: Some Stray Thoughts on Tamilian Antiquities").

35. See e.g. Nallasami Pillai & Ramanan 1897–1914: XIV.1 (July 1913), 24 (From: S.S. Bharati, *Tamil Classics and Tamilagam*, 1–24).

advanced Tamil culture. With this argument they also defended themselves against a Brahmanical Hinduism which classified them as Śūdras.

Thus popular Orientalist theories, which were to be modified to suit Tamil interests, were closely examined. Thus, for example, the *Siddhanta Deepika* printed correspondence with the Paris Tamilologist Julien Vinson (1843–1926).<sup>36</sup> For the Śaivites it was very important to prove that the Tamil script and the classical Tamil literature were already in existence long before 1500 BCE, and thus before the migration of the Aryans. Admittedly, Sanskrit was an Aryan language, but had first emerged under the formative influence of Tamil.<sup>37</sup> A monotheistic Śaivism was supposed to have been the ancestral religion of the Tamils long before the arrival of the Aryans. In south India many elements of the pre-Aryan Indian civilization were still preserved. There was no question of an Aryan-brahmanical monopoly on Indian cultural and religious history. ‘Most of what is ignorantly called Aryan Philosophy, Aryan civilization, is literally Dravidian or Tamil at bottom.’<sup>38</sup>

The Neo-Śaivite outlook on history is also very pronounced in Maraimalai Adigal, especially in his late work *Religion of the Tamils* (*tamiḷar matam*, 1941), which contains a comprehensive presentation of his thoughts on this matter. Here Maraimalai can already refer to the excavations of the Indus Valley Civilization, which for him are an unequivocal proof of an advanced pre-Aryan Dravidian culture (Maraimalai Adigal n.d.: 1–4). While the Tamils in the south represent the direct descendents of this Dravidian culture, the ‘few thousands’ of Aryans who migrated to India mixed with the Tamils so that the contemporary Brahmans could best be described as ‘Dravido-Aryans’ (*tirāviṭa āriyar*) (Maraimalai Adigal n.d.: 4–6; 1999: 25–36). Maraimalai therefore challenged the Tamils to recollect their historical roots and to reject all brahmanical influence:

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36. See Nallasami Pillai & Ramanan 1897–1914 V.1.2 (June & July 1901), 30–32 (Julien Vinson, letter dated 31 May 1901 to *Siddhanta Deepika* and ‘Prof. Julien Vinson’s Review of the Siddhanta Movement, translated from *Revue de Linguistique*’); V.10 (February & March 1902), 161–162 (‘A Tamilian’: A Reply to Prof. Julien Vinson of Paris); V.12 (May 1902), 193–194 (Julien Vinson, letter dated 17 Feb. 1902 to *Siddhanta Deepika*). On this issue see also Zvelebil (1992: 149–150).

37. See e.g. Nallasami Pillai & Ramanan 1897–1914 V (September & October 1901), 78–81 (From: D. Savariroyan, Some Disputed Points cleared).

38. Nallasami Pillai & Ramanan 1897–1914 II.5 (October 1898), p. 112 (From: Nallasami Pillai, Ancient Tamil Civilization, 109–113). This concerns the reproduction of a quotation from the above-mentioned letter from P. Sundaram Pillai to J.M. Nallasami Pillai, dated 19.Dec.1896.

Five thousand years ago, that is, before the Aryans entered this land of India, the forebears of the Tamils boasted a civilization. They instructed the uncivilized Aryans in the civilized life. Therefore the Tamils, who come from the tradition of such forebears, should become aware of the ancient glory and change accordingly. (Maraimalai Adigal 1999: 282)

In particular, however, Maraimalai demanded the recollection of Śaivism as the ‘Religion of the Tamils’:

Before this intrusion of the northern people, all the cultured and civilized Tamils were as a body strict monotheists paying their worship only to Siva as the almighty God of the universe [...] all Tamils must abandon worshipping the multitudinous gods and goddesses and deified heroes and return to the monotheistic belief of their ancestors and worship only the one almighty God Siva with the divine mother Uma. (Maraimalai Adigal n.d.: 14, 37).

The political and social effects of Tamil Neo-Śaivism are difficult to evaluate, although clear influences on the secular Dravidian movement, which will be discussed below, are apparent. The anti-brahmanical ideas of the Justice Party were in part shaped by the Śaiva-Siddhānta movement. In 1916 Maraimalai initiated the ‘Pure Tamil Movement’ (*taṇittamiḷ iyakkam*), which had the goal of spreading a form of Tamil which managed without Sanskrit words. This linguistic purism shared the goals of the Dravidian movement, above all the rejection of Hindi as the Indian national language, and many Neo-Śaivites were active members of these organizations. During the anti-Hindi agitations of the 1930s, a series of shared political actions came about (Venkatachalapathy 1995). As a rule, however, the leaders of the Neo-Śaivites were very critical of the secular and partly anti-religious activities of the Dravidian movement. Nevertheless language purists founded in 1947 the Tamil Political Association (*tamiḷ aracuk kaḷakam*, also *tamiḷ aracuk kaṭci*), which eventually entered into a loose alliance with the AIADMK, an offshoot from the Dravidian Progress Association (*tirāviṭa munṇērra kaḷakam/DMK*), although refraining from daily politics (Ramaswamy 1997: 59–60; Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1984: 42–43). Even today Neo-Śaivite publications are in large part responsible for keeping the idea of an advanced and flourishing pre-Aryan Dravidian culture alive among Tamils (e.g., Ramanathan 1998, Govindan 1999).

## 5. *The Dravidian Movement*

The founding of the South Indian Liberal Federation (usually called the Justice Party) in 1916 is widely recognized as the point at which the secular

Dravidian movement first took a political form.<sup>39</sup> At first, however, the Justice Party represented only an elite platform of politically and economically influential members of non-brahman *jātis*, such as for example, Chettis and Vellalars, whose anti-brahmanism had no mass support and was not really driven by an explicit Dravidian nationalism.<sup>40</sup> It was only the Self-Respect Movement (*cuyamariyātai iyakkam*)<sup>41</sup> started in 1925 by E. V. Ramasami Naicker *alias* Periyar (1879–1973) that provided a popular catalyst for a Tamil nationalism that had a completely secular foundation and was agnostic or even atheistic and anti-religious in religious matters. In the 1930s and '40s there thus developed a Dravidian mass movement, which had among its declared goals the abolition of brahmanical oppression through the caste system and religion and the revival of Dravidian culture and society. The invocation of a venerable flourishing Tamil civilization, destroyed by the Aryans, played a significant role in the Dravidian propaganda of this period. The reinterpretation of the Orientalist Aryan migration theory becomes a *leitmotif* of the argument in which, however, recourse to historical reasoning takes different forms (see also Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1984: 76–80). Although explicit historical digressions are rare in Ramasami, the Aryan migration theory is very often alluded to, and a subaltern interpretation was presupposed by his followers and readers:

We do not need to explain how the Aryans entered and settled in the Dravidian country (*tirāviṭa nāṭu*), and subjugated and oppressed the Dravidians. Nor do we need to explain how before the Aryans entered the Dravidian country, the Dravidian country had a civilization and arts of the highest rank ... (Ramasami 1996: 33)<sup>42</sup>

39. On the Dravidian movement in general, see, e.g., Irschick (1969, 1986), Hellmann-Rajanayagam (1984), Ryerson (1988), Subramanian (1999).

40. See Washbrook (1976: 274–287, 316–319, 324–325); Baker (1976: 77–84). While the remarks of Washbrook and Baker on the power politics of the Justice Party are very illuminating, their overall evaluation of the phenomenon of the Dravidian Movement nevertheless remains inadequate, as several critics have already noted (e.g., Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1984: 13–18; Pandian 1995).

41. As a result of Ramasami assuming the leadership of the Justice Party in 1938, a merger of the Justice Party and the Self-Respect movement into the Dravidian Association (*tirāviṭār kaḷakam*/D. K.) came about in 1944.

42. This quotation comes from a 1940 compilation on the subject of *tamiḷ nāṭu* which was apparently not entirely written by Ramasami alone. It was first published in Ramasami's journal *viṭutalai* and is reprinted in the cited volume on pages 15–58). For evidence of how Ramasami uses allusions to the Aryan migration in his political activism, see, e.g., Anaimuthu

There are however occasional speeches in which Ramasami devotes himself to detailed historical problems and, referring to the results of the excavations of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, states that an advanced Dravidian culture had originally encompassed the entire Indian subcontinent. Through the Aryan migration the Dravidians in the north were overthrown or forced south,<sup>43</sup> so that the present dominance of the Aryan Brahmans in the Dravidian south marks only the endpoint of a millenia-long history of Aryan expansionary impulses. In his comments Ramasami relies explicitly on the Orientalist Aryan migration theory, which by this time had found its way into history textbooks and historical atlases, as he himself emphasizes: ‘These are the same books which are used as college textbooks for Indian history.’ (Ramasami 1996: 8)

The works of the great Tamil poet Bharati Dasan (1891–1964), the poetic mouthpiece of the Dravidian Movement, certainly also made a decisive contribution to the popularization of the Dravidian view of history. In his poems the Aryans are ‘Mlecchas’, who came as ‘common beggars’, to ‘plunder the land.’<sup>44</sup> In a famous poem from the year 1930, which bears the characteristic title ‘Justice Song of the Humiliated’, he sings of the brahmanical conquest in detail:

The Tamils ruled this land. Then, those who are called Aryans, // settled here *aṭi* — *cakiyē*, settled here *aṭi*.

In order through false promises, through wicked deceit, through strife, // to rule fraudulently, they came *aṭi* — *cakiyē*, to rule fraudulently, they came *aṭi*.

The Tamils of those times who said: ‘We don’t agree with the depraved Veda’, // they killed by impaling *aṭi* — *cakiyē*, they killed by impaling *aṭi*.

They made the cool land into a place of execution. ‘[This is] for our life // a constant place’ they said *aṭi* — *cakiyē*, ‘a constant place’ they said *aṭi*.

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(1974: 244–245, 259, 268, 281, 285, 689), Ramasami (1992).

43. See Ramasami (1996: 3–14, esp. 5–6 [Speech to members of the *tiruvallur nanṇerik kaḷakam*, 11 Jan. 1942]).

44. Thiruvasaḡam & Kalladan (1993: 902) — from the poem cycle *tirāviṭa puraṭcit tirumaṇat tiṭṭam* (1949), p. 1853 (3rd and 4th verses of the poem *ellām āriyar karaṭikaḷ* from the poetic anthology *tamiḷukku amutenru pēr* [1978]).



They made a caste division. To raise themselves up, // they laid  
down the law, *aṭi* — *cakiyē*, they laid down the law, *aṭi*.<sup>45</sup>

The subaltern reinterpretation of the Aryan migration theory was especially highly developed in the work of C. N. Annadurai (1909–1969), who during the first great anti-Hindi agitation in the second half of the 1930s joined the close circle around Ramasami. In a book from the year 1943, which bears the characteristic title ‘Aryan Illusion’ (*āriyamāyai*), Annadurai explains in detail, referring to a multitude of popular history books, his view of prehistoric and early India. In this his first concern is to contradict the assumption implicit in the Orientalist migration theory that the Aryan migrants had also brought India’s culture:

When the European researchers fabricated and promulgated the fiction according to which the Aryans are supposed violently to have invaded and to have brought culture to the people, these high-caste people began jealously to support this fiction, for it fed their pride. (Annadurai 1995:58).

Annadurai thought the excavations of the Indus Valley Civilization sufficient to disprove this theory:

From the prehistorical evidence, which has been excavated in the Indus plain and in Mohenjo-Daro, it is quite clear, that there was a civilization, which pre-existed the Aryan civilization. (Annadurai 1995:59).

For Annadurai this oldest Indian civilization was genuinely Dravidian. According to him the Dravidian culture had then been in full bloom throughout India and was distinguished above all by the attributes of ‘equality’ and ‘fraternity’ (Annadurai 1995:70). The emergence of Aryan rule, which destroyed the Dravidian culture, was for Annadurai less the result of a direct conquest than an insidious infiltration which had occurred first in the north and much later also in the south, which had been able to preserve much longer an independent Dravidian culture (Annadurai 1995:54). The result of the brahmanical influence was nevertheless equally devastating everywhere:

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45. Thiruvassagam & Kalladan (1993:93–96): 18th, 24th, 36th, 44th and 45th verses of the poem *tāḷttappaṭṭār camattuvap pāṭṭu*. The words *aṭi* (familiar form of address) and *cakiyē* (Oh beloved!) are components of a traditional metre of Tamil Siddha literature, which Bharati Dasan has here taken over. In the present poem, they have hardly any real inherent meaning, and were therefore left untranslated. See also Irschick (1986:94–95), where this poem of Bharati Dasan is also discussed.

Not until after the Aryans had arrived did caste differences, religious differences and religious enmity develop in the Tamil land, after which the present misery emerged. All this is a very great disaster, which has come about for the Tamils through contact with the Aryans. (Annadurai 1995:72)

It is self-evident for Annadurai that separate quarters for the outcastes (*cēri*) and Brahman quarters (*akkirakāram*, Skt. *agrahāra*), and by extension every type of caste difference are incompatible with his idea of a Dravidian society.<sup>46</sup> Discrimination against the Dalits is an established recurrent motif in statements by Dravidian protagonists about brahmanical oppression. Thus, for example, Bharati Dasan writes: ‘The Aryans banished those Adidraavidians who did not agree with them to the *cēri*?’<sup>47</sup> Ramasami also always made it clear that he understood ‘Shudras’ and ‘Untouchables’ to be equal fellow-sufferers of brahmanical discrimination, and that every type of caste discrimination was incompatible with the Dravidian idea.<sup>48</sup> Quite unlike the Justice Party, the Dravidian movement was, because of its egalitarian basis, able to mobilize Dalits as well, even though overall it remained dominated by caste Hindus.<sup>49</sup>

In 1949 Annadurai founded the first Dravidian-oriented political party, the DMK. With this party he won the 1967 election in the state of Madras (later Tamilnadu) and thereby contributed to the final breakthrough for Dravidian nationalism among the Tamils. Since then the subaltern impulse of the Dravidian movement has largely been lost, and it has lost some of its internal dynamism. The historical anti-Aryan reconstruction of Indian history from a Dravidian perspective is nevertheless even today still common property in Tamil nationalist circles.<sup>50</sup>

46. See Annadurai (1995:48). An interpretation of the Dalits as the descendents of pre-Dravidian primordial inhabitants is not found anywhere in the Dravidian movement. This interpretation was common within Orientalist discourse and was well known in South India, for example, through a widely-read book by Gilbert Slater (1924:20–21).

47. Thiruvassagam & Kalladan (1993:95): Verse 37 of *tāḷtappaṭṭār camattuvap pāṭṭu* (1930).

48. See, e.g., Anaimuthu (1974:60): *kuṭi aracu* (11 Oct. 1931).

49. The actual participation of Dalits within the Dravidian movement is disputed by, e.g., Geetha & Rajadurai (1998:350–377) and Subramanian (1999:110–113).

50. See, e.g., Tiruvenkatam (1998:102–120) and Vasantan (1998:9–11). Interestingly, there is hardly any engagement with newer theoretical representations in these works. For example, a Dravidian migration around 3500 BCE, which is repeatedly defended in the work of the influential Dravidologist K. Zvelebil (e.g., Zvelebil 1990:48–50) in continuation of older Orientalist theories, finds no resonance in the Dravidian literature.

## 6. *Adi Hindu and Ad Dharm*

Besides the major anti-brahmanical movements presented so far there were also numerous smaller little-researched amalgamations of Dalits, which also argued from the foundation of a subaltern reinterpretation of the Aryan migration theory.

One such is the Adi-Hindu movement, which had its heyday in the 1920s and '30s among Dalits (in particular Chamars) in the larger cities of north India (above all Kanpur, Lucknow, Benares and Allahabad).<sup>51</sup> As a consequence of urbanization many Dalits had also found their way to the city only to find that caste discrimination persisted there and that they would only be permitted to do menial work (see also Bayly 1999:225–229). The uprooting of traditional village structures brought about by migration, together with a certain degree of educational opportunity in the city, nevertheless produced among urban Dalits a new literate generation, who were no longer prepared to accept being discriminated against as Untouchables. In these circles a renewed turning to Hindu *bhakti* traditions came about, in which the two Sants Kabir and Ravidas (a Chamar) in particular enjoyed great popularity. They also built and maintained temples of their own. In the 1920s a broad religious *bhakti* movement, the Adi-Hindu movement, emerged under the leadership of personalities such as Swami Achchutananda (1879–1933) and Ram Charan (1888–1938). Many of its members had apparently originally been associated with the *Ārya Samāj* but were disappointed that even completion of *śuddhi* — the initiation ceremony of the *Ārya Samāj* for Dalits, Christians and Muslims, etc. (Seunarine 1977) — did not, in their eyes, result in true elimination of caste discrimination. They therefore demanded a Dalit identity of their own, which they justified by a reinterpretation of the Aryan migration theory:

The Untouchables, the so-called Harijans, are in fact “*ādi-Hindu*” (i.e., the original or the autochthonous Nagas or the Dasas of the North and the Dravidas of the South) of the subcontinent, and they are the undisputed heavenly owners of Bharat [...] All the others are immigrants to the land including the Aryans, who conquered the original populations not by valor but by deceit and manipulation of the whole society by usurping others’ rights,

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51. See on the following Khare (1984) and Gooptu (1993). There were however apparently also Adi-Hindu movements in other Indian regions. For instance, Malleyally Laxmaiah reports in an article on one similar movement which emerged in Hyderabad in 1917 and was initiated by Bhagyareddy Varma, “Why do we choose to forget our past?” <http://www.ambedkar.org/vivek/Whydo.htm> (24 Nov. 2000).

subjugating the peace loving, and rendering the self-sufficient people indigent and slaves. (Khare 1984:85).

According to this view of history, *bhakti* was a pre-Aryan religion, which knew no social discrimination and which was practiced by the aboriginal inhabitants of India, the Adi Hindus. The Dalits now claimed to be the descendents of these Adi Hindus and demanded thus to enjoy again the rights lost because of the Aryan conquest. That meant, primarily, no longer being allocated only menial work and no longer having to endure social discrimination.

The Adi Hindu movement had no fixed structures but was rather an informal network of local assemblies. Through the activities of itinerant preachers their ideas were widely disseminated in the cities of north India in the 1920s and '30s. Not least because of the lack of organization the Adi Hindu movement experienced only a brief heyday of one or two decades. Nevertheless their thought remains alive today, at least among north Indian Chamars (Khare 1984).

At almost the same time as the Adi Hindu movement a similar Dalit reform movement emerged in Punjab, the Ad Dharm (Juergensmeyer 1982). Like the Adi Hindu movement, with which at least in the second half of the 1920s there had been close contacts (Juergensmeyer 1982:25–26), the members of Ad Dharm were also mainly Chamars, although like the Adi Hindus they understood themselves as representatives of all Dalits. Ad Dharm also emerged on the initiative of younger, educated Dalit activists, who had moved away from the *Ārya Samāj* because they perceived that the interests of the Dalits were not really represented there. They therefore initiated their own religious movement, which held its founding meeting in 1926 under the leadership of the charismatic Mangoo Ram. A reinterpretation of the Aryan migration theory also played the central role for the Ad Dharm. Thus a poster from 1927 reads:

We are the original people of this country, and our religion is Ad Dharm [*ād dharm*]. The Hindu *qaum* [nation] came from outside and enslaved us. [...] There was a time when we ruled India, brothers, and the land used to be ours. The Hindus came from Iran and destroyed our *qaum*. [...] They destroyed our history, brothers. The Hindus rewrote our history, brothers. (Juergensmeyer 1982:45–46)

The spiritual practice of Ad Dharm was concentrated above all on the veneration of the Sant Ravidas, while the ritual (*satsang*) borrowed heavily from Sikh practices.

The movement very quickly assumed a strictly regulated form (headquarters, a newspaper, etc.) and began to engage deeply in politics as well. It

achieved *inter alia* recognition as a religion in its own right in the 1931 census, which assigned to it at least a tenth of all Dalits in Punjab. The Ad Dharm had a very critical attitude toward Gandhi and explicitly supported Ambedkar in his demand for separate electorates for the Dalits during the Round Table Conference in 1930–1932.<sup>52</sup> In the 1930s the politicization of the Ad Dharm progressed further, and Mangoo Ram and other leaders began to stand for election. The Ad Dharm did not survive this politicization, and crumbled in the 1940s although it experienced a certain degree of institutional revival around 1970. Above and beyond that many Chamars in Punjab still describe themselves even today as Ad Dharmi, and the veneration of Ravidas propagated by the Ad Dharm is likewise still very popular among them.

That the subaltern reinterpretation of the Aryan migration theory has become a sort of commonplace among Dalit activists of the present is certainly in no small part due to Dalit movements like Adi Hindu and Ad Dharm, together with Dalit Buddhism and the Dravidian movement. Thus, for example, a book of 1992 reads:

Most people know about the Arab and Moghal invasion, and about the later European Christian-White man's invasion of India; but the Indian people in general, except a few historians, have forgotten the earliest Aryan invasion of the Indian soil and have also forgotten whom these invaders defeated, subjugated and oppressed, and oppress even to this day! [...] It is the Hindu Imperialism which has made Dalits untouchables and unseeables in their own homeland.<sup>53</sup>

The Dalit movement thus shows once more to what extent the reinterpretation of the Aryan migration theory has become a part of the discourse of numerous subaltern efforts at emancipation. It is precisely this that must be borne in mind in explaining the newer Hindu nationalist attempts, discussed below, to reject entirely the Aryan migration theory.

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52. See Juergensmeyer (1982: 124–131). When Gandhi undertook his famous fast in order to dissuade Ambedkar from his demand for separate electorates, Mangoo Ram undertook a counter-fast in order to support Ambedkar.

53. Theertha (1992: viii, x [Foreword by P. M. Suresh Kumar]). See also Viyogi (1995), who won the Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar National Award of the Bharatiya Dalit Sahitya Academy (New Delhi) in 1986 for the Hindi version of his book. This interpretation of the Aryan migration theory is also widespread within the Christian Dalit movement (e.g., Massey 1995: 22–39).

## 7. *Hindu Nationalism*

While a large part of the Hindu Dvija elites supported the goals of Gandhi and the Congress Party in the national liberation struggle, there was a minority whose vision of an independent India was determined by the image of a Hindu nationalism defined in religio-cultural terms.<sup>54</sup> The guiding spirit of this trend can be seen as V.D. Savarkar (1883–1966), a prominent resistance fighter against the British who, under the term ‘Hindutva’ (“Hinduness”), had since the 1920s propagated the creation of an independent Hindu nation-state, whose territory would be inhabited by a homogeneous Hindu population with a unitary religion and culture (Savarkar 1989). Only his postulated Hindu race (*jāti*), which had emerged from a mixture of the Aryans with other peoples of the subcontinent and whose members felt a close sense of togetherness among themselves, had a claim to the land. For Savarkar the Hindu nation is supported by a Hindu culture (*sanskriti*) of which the Sanskrit language was the most important external sign (Savarkar 1989: 92).

The disastrous consequences of the Hindutva doctrine are apparent when one surveys the existing religious and cultural diversity of the Indian subcontinent out of which the Hindutva politicians wish to forge a unified people. Their attempt at an ethnic and cultural homogenization can be seen to involve a double strategy of exclusion and appropriation. A strategy of religious appropriation means that Dalits, Buddhists and Sikhs, for example, are regarded as Hindus and their own identity denied them. By contrast because they have their holy cities outside of India Muslims and Christians are entirely excluded and are required to assimilate themselves thoroughly to Hindu culture. In particular the Muslims here provide a welcome image of opponents against which to form an identity; in Savarkar’s words: “Nothing can weld peoples into a nation and nations into a state as the pressure of a common foe” (Savarkar 1989: 43).

The Aryan migration theory at first played no particular argumentative role in Hindu nationalism. As indicated above, it was presupposed without question by Savarkar and the emergence of a Hindu nation constructed around it. This impression of indifference changed, however, with Madhev Sadashiv Golwalkar (1906–1973), who from 1940 until his death was leader of the extremist paramilitary organization the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS). In contrast to Savarkar, Golwalkar entirely rejects the Aryan migration theory in his very

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54. On Hindu nationalism in general, see Klimkeit (1981:226–272), McKean (1996), Jaffrelot (1996), and Zavos (2000).

influential book published in 1939 under the title *We, or the Nationhood Defined*.<sup>55</sup> Without any supporting arguments he declares:

Hindus came into this land from nowhere, but are indigenous children of the soil always, from times immemorial. (Golwalkar 1939: 8)

This point of view soon became common property within Hindu nationalism. We can only speculate concerning the precise reasons for this change in argument (see also Jaffrelot 1995). First, with this rejection of the Aryan migration theory Golwalkar overcomes contradictions which are to be found in Savarkar. Moreover Golwalkar had engaged very intensively with European nationalism debates, including Fascism and National Socialism, and thereby probably became aware of the importance of establishing historically the connection between nation and territory. Above all, however, Golwalkar certainly had in mind the strong anti-brahmanical emancipation movements described above.<sup>56</sup> Subaltern reinterpretations of the Aryan migration theory were a radical and powerful counterproposition to the idea of a common Hindu nation. For example, in Tamil South India, where the ideas of the Dravidian movement predominated, it prevented the Hindu nationalist movement from gaining any influence worth speaking of (Subramanian 1999: 316). In his revisionism Golwalkar remains within the same hermeneutical presuppositions as the anti-brahmanical interpretations of the Aryan migration, for he still recognizes Indian prehistory as a formative period for identity and his denial simply reflects a mirror image of the current theory in which now indigeneity rather than migration is asserted. His arguments are thus a sort of direct

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55. There were precedents for this in the *Ārya Samāj*, but also in a certain sense in Tilak (1856–1920), who thought the Arctic circle the original homeland of the Aryans, pushed the Aryan migration back to 4000 to 4500 BCE and thereby made the European peoples a mere branch line of the Aryans (Leopold 1970: 275–276; Jaffrelot 1995: 330–332).

56. The denial of the Aryan migration theory was already at this time a popular way of arguing among Brahmans in Madras. Thus H. W. Schomerus writes: ‘When I was in Madras in the summer of 1929, in order to find material for my study of the old Dravidian culture and religion in South India, several Brahmans, among them also teacher of Indian history at one of the many colleges, sought to dissuade me for they asserted that there was no Dravidian race at all apart from the Aryan. That the Aryans had migrated to India, was an invention of European scholars. The so-called Aryans and Dravidians belonged to the same race. The Dravidian languages were, according to them, not distinct languages but derivatives from Sanskrit, older Prakrit forms. [...] The motive which drove them was political. They feared a strengthening, through research on old Dravidian culture and religion, of the anti-brahmanical party, [...] which has many supporters in South India.’ (Schomerus 1932: 13).

counter-myth to the Aryan migration theory.

The price for Golwalkar's denial of the Aryan migration was isolation from Orientalist discourse and with it from the official account of history as it was transmitted in schools and universities. Hindu nationalism remained, however, largely marginalized during the anticolonial freedom struggle, nor did this alter after independence as long as the Congress Party dominated Indian politics. Due to this marginalization Hindu nationalism and its ideas remained for a long time in a certain self-referentiality, as it lacked a connection to dominant socio-political discourses. As a result his revision of the Aryan migration theory received at first no public attention.

This situation changed, however, when in the 1980s an unexpected political rise of Hindu nationalism began, supported above all by three organizations: the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the paramilitary Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) who felt themselves to belong together as a 'family' (*sangh parivār*). In this the most important role was played by the BJP, founded in 1980, which achieved great success as a political party and in 1998 even became the strongest power in the Indian national parliament.<sup>57</sup> The success of the BJP is due not least to the fact that it sought to broaden the appeal of Hindu nationalism, above all by efforts to widen the membership beyond the small, extremist, brahman-dominated high-caste class to which it had previously been limited. This meant the BJP attempting, at least, to increase their ranks by opening them to Dalits and Muslims. Along with this went the attempt to adapt Hindu nationalist ideas to the dominant academic and social discourses. Radical ideas were no longer expressed in public and norms such as democracy, protection of minorities and secularism, established in the Indian constitution, were formally acknowledged.

In this situation, contesting the Aryan migration theory also represented a problem, for the overwhelming majority of western Indologists and their Indian colleagues even at the end of the 20th century accepted an Aryan migration into India (e.g., Deshpande & Hook 1979, Erdosy 1995, Bergunder & Das 2002). Indian prehistory, apart from the excavations of the Indus Valley Civilization, was not the focus of special efforts in academic research in independent India. Among Indian scholars it was, however, as before a commonplace that the varṇa system goes back to an Aryan migration, whereby the Aryans represented

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57. The phenomenon of the rise of the BJP is extremely complex and cannot be further analysed here. See however, Jaffrelot (1996), Hansen & Jaffrelot (1998), Hansen (1999), Bergunder (2001).



the Dvijās and the Śūdras and outcasts the oppressed indigenous population, who were excluded by the Vedic religion (e.g., Thapar 1966: 37–38, 48; Mookerji 1989: 71–73, 94–96; Mahajan 1990: 62; Gupta 2000: 198–209). Moreover in Indian historical circles the Aryan migration theory was often built into a model of tradition which seeks to understand Indian culture as having been syncretic from the beginning (e.g., Thapar 1966: 49).

In contrast to many other of their openly offensive teachings, the Hindu nationalists did not seek to keep the question of the Aryan migration out of public discourses or to modify it; rather, efforts were made to help the theory of the indigenesness of the Hindus achieve public recognition. For this the initiative of the publisher Sita Ram Goel (b.1921)<sup>58</sup> was decisive. Goel may be considered one of the most radical, but at the same time also one of the most intellectual, of the Hindu nationalist ideologues. His radical views ensure that at times even the cadres of the Sangh Parivar distance themselves from him, for his extremist anti-Muslim tirades are seen by them as an obstacle to experiencing wider social acceptance. Since 1981 Goel has run a publishing house named 'Voice of India' that is one of the few which publishes Hindu nationalist literature in English which at the same time makes a 'scientific' claim. Although no official connections exist, the books of 'Voice of India' — which are of outstanding typographical quality and are sold at a subsidized price — are widespread among the ranks of the leaders of the Sangh Parivar.

According to his own statements, from the outset one of the declared goals of Goel was to use his publishing house to contradict in print the Aryan migration theory. It is therefore above all thanks to his efforts that since the 1990s a mass of books with high print runs have appeared, each of which has the declared goal of 'scientifically' refuting the Aryan migration theory.<sup>59</sup> Not all of these authors, however, are thereby to be reckoned to be on the extreme of the Hindu nationalist spectrum, and the theoretical outlines put forward are

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58. The details given here about Goel come in the main from 'Interview with Voice of India by Hinduism Today', dating from ca. 1998 (<http://www.hindu.org/publications/ramswarup/voiceofindia.html> [23 June 2000]).

59. See Rao (1991); Sethna (<sup>2</sup>1992; the first edition was published by S. & S. Publ. in Calcutta in 1980); Talageri (1993a,b), Rajaram (1993), Frawley (1994), Gautier (1994), Singh (1995), Rajaram (1995), Frawley (1995), Rajaram & Frawley (<sup>2</sup>1997; the first edition was published by W.H. Press in Quebec in 1995); Elst (1999).

also in part quite varied.<sup>60</sup> All of these books are either published directly by Voice of India, or by Aditya Prakashan, a publisher currently run by Goel's son, Pradeep Kumar Goel.<sup>61</sup> This massive media staging of a 'scientific' revision of the Aryan migration theory was crowned with notable success.<sup>62</sup> The publica-

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60. Most authors have no appropriate subject-specific study to show for themselves. *Rajaram* is an emeritus mathematician and computer programmer, *Kak* (b. 1947) is a computer scientist at Louisiana State University, *Talageri* (b. 1958) is a bank employee in Bombay, *Sethna* alias Amal Kiran (b. 1904) holds a B. A. and has been connected with the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry since completing his studies, *Frawley* (b. 1950) has only a high school diploma and runs his own Institute for Vedic Studies in Santa Fe, *Singh* (b. 1931) previously wrote novels, poems and non-fiction books in Hindi, *Gautier* (b. 1950) is South Asia correspondent for the newspaper *Le Figaro*; *Elst* (b. 1959) received a doctorate in 1998 from the Catholic University of Leuven for his work on the ideological development of Hindu nationalism (Elst 2001); *Rao* (b. 1922) is the only true specialist among these authors, for he worked for the Archaeological Survey of India until 1980. It is also notable that an American (Frawley), a Belgian (Elst), a Frenchman (Gautier) and two expatriate Indians (Rajaram/Canada, Kak/USA) are represented among these authors. While a radical Hindu nationalist attitude is obvious in some authors (Elst, Talageri), no connection to Hindu nationalism is apparent in the works of at least three authors (Rao, Sethna, Singh), who rather argue very carefully and focus directly on the question at hand.

61. In contrast to Voice of India, however, no extremist literature is published by Aditya Prakashan whose list also includes titles on Hinduism and Buddhism which are not oriented to Hindu nationalism. According to statements by his father in the abovementioned interview, however, Goel Junior is also conscious of his obligations in Hindu nationalist causes.

62. The theory of the indigenesness of the Aryans has already often been proposed by Hindu scholars, without there being evidence of any direct connections to Hindu nationalism (cf. the information in Ghosh 1951:220–221). These individual academic voices were, however, treated rather as exotic specimens and hardly taken seriously by other scholars. In recent times too, some objections by Hindu scholars to the Aryan migration theory have been published which are not directly connected to the barrage of publications of Voice of India and Aditya Prakashan. There is first a linguistically-oriented work by S. W. Misra, a linguist at Benares Hindu University in Varanasi (Misra 1992). Also B. B. Lal, former General Director of the Archeological Survey of India, argued against an Aryan migration theory in his book on the Indus Valley Civilization (Lal 1997:281–287). Lal became known to the public above all for his excavations which were intended to prove the historicity of the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa (van der Veer 1994:157–159). Misra and Lal put forward their arguments factually and without any reference to Hindu nationalist implications. The results of their research are nevertheless eagerly cited by Elst (Elst 1999:85, 122, 124, 183, 332) and Rajaram (1995:169–171, 217), among others. The successful novel *Return of the Aryans* (1995) by B. S. Gidwani appears to have emerged independently of Hindu nationalist revisionist attempts, but it nevertheless has the idea of Aryan autochthony, albeit in an unorthodox form, as its main theme (Gidwani 1995).

tions found wide distribution among the more educated followers of the Sangh Parivar. Gradually also a certain public awareness beyond Hindu nationalist circles was achieved.<sup>63</sup> The increasing political influence of Hindu nationalism in the 1990s resulted in attempts to revise the Aryan migration theory also becoming known to the academic public.

In the background to these efforts at revision of traditionally held views stood explicitly the attempt to remove the basis of subaltern reinterpretations of the Aryan migration theory, and thereby also to counter resistance to Hindu nationalism as it was articulated in these emancipatory movements. The revisionists themselves identify as their primary targets the reinterpretations of the Dravidian movement and the Dalit movement — the latter mostly equated by them with Marxism. These were identified, for example in a book by Frawley, as the primary and thus presumably the most important enemies:

The Aryan invasion theory is not a mere academic matter, of concern only to historians. In the colonial era the British used it to divide India along north-south, Aryan-Dravidian lines — an interpretation various south Indian politicians have taken up as the cornerstone for their political projection of Dravidian identity. The Aryan invasion theory is the basis of the Marxist critique of Indian history where caste struggle takes the place of class struggle with the so-called pro-Aryan indigenous peoples turned into oppressed masses and the invading Aryans turned into the oppressed masses and the invading Aryans turned into oppressors, the corrupt ruling elite. (Frawley 1994: 4.)<sup>64</sup>

From this it is clear that the more recent Hindu nationalist attempt to contest the Aryan migration theory is directed in the first instance against the subaltern discourse and must be understood in the light of this ideological objective.

This was clearly recognized above all by Romila Thapar, who responded in

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63. Thus a book from the circle of Voice of India/Aditya Prakashan authors, originally published by a Theosophical publisher in the USA (Feuerstein et al. 1995), was also issued in India in 1999 by Motilal Banarsidass, one of the leading indological publishers in the country, thereby providing revisionists with an excellent new platform for the spread of their theories beyond Hindu nationalist circles. (This book appeared also, among other translations, in Italian, and a German translation was also planned.) As a recognized journalist Gautier too reaches a broad public (Gautier 1996, 2000).

64. This passage is found also printed on the back of the book, which indicates that these statements appear to have special significance for the publisher as well.

great detail to the efforts at a revision of the Aryan migration theory.<sup>65</sup> She is concerned above all with the hermeneutic basis of revisionism which she accuses of depending entirely on the very 19th-century categories out of which the Aryan migration theory developed. Nothing more than an inversion of the facts is propagated: indigeousness instead of invasion! Moreover, she emphasizes the completely ahistorical character of the arguments:

... it is an attempt to project a unified, continuous Indian identity where Aryanism, encapsulated in the culture of the Vedas and upper castes, is not only at the root of Indian history, but moulds history and is projected as the major cultural expression of India. Furthermore, that what are described as 'Aryan' beliefs and values are eternal. (Thapar 1992: 23)

Against this background it appears paradoxical that the revisionists justify their theory of Aryan autochthony with the clichés of postcolonial theory. They severely criticize western Indology and archaeology for continuing to be weighed down by the baggage of the mostly unquestioned theoretical assumptions of colonial Orientalism. Thus Frawley and Rajaram, in near-Saidian style, write that it would be by no means too coarse a simplification to say that "the Germans" (in particular Max Müller) "created the Aryan-invasion theory and the British used it" (Rajaram & Frawley 1995: 5). With this critique the revisionists have hit upon a sore point, one with which moreover Thapar is in agreement (e.g., Thapar 1996). Moreover, a very interesting side-effect of this discourse is that, following this confrontation, established Indologists and South Asian archaeologists have to give stronger account of the methodology of their theoretical constructions. This has certainly resulted in the tracking down and overcoming of many still extant relics of colonial Orientalism.<sup>66</sup> This development has nevertheless no positive consequences for the revisionist theories, for these likewise are connected to the colonial categories of the 19th century and are merely adorned with a postcolonial façade.<sup>67</sup>

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65. See on the following Thapar (1989, 1992, 1996). Thapar, who most recently worked as a Professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, is an Indian historian specialising in prehistorical and early South Asia.

66. Thereby in the meantime practically every Orientalist theory has come under suspicion, as shown by the radical critiques of Inden (1990) and Chakrabarti (1997).

67. Against this background it is not surprising that even the factual arguments of those who wish to establish an Aryan autochthony appear less than sound. Although the revisionist publications of Voice of India and Aditya Prakashan can, from their contents, hardly be considered scholarly, in the meantime Indologists and Indo-Europeanists have concerned

### 8. *Persistence and fragility of discourses*

The debate on the Aryan migration theory shows in a fascinating way the power and persistence of discourses. Both anti-brahmanism as well as Hindu nationalism construct their identities over against the Aryan migration theory, which originally represented a construction of the colonial Orientalism of the 19th century. This shows how much the Foucauldian ‘speaking subjects’ are subject to the rules and exclusion mechanisms of ruling discourses:

It is always possible that one might speak the truth in the space of a wild exteriority, but one is “in the true” only by obeying the rules of a discursive “policing” which one has to reactivate in each of one’s discourses. (Foucault 1991: 25)

Both anti-brahmanical as well as Hindu nationalistic interpretations of early Indian religious history prove at the same time, however, the great dynamics and considerable transformatory potential of ruling discourses. They are in no way monolithic or invariant, but rather of polyphonic and unstable nature (see King 1999: 86, 200–207, but also O’Hanlon 1988: 216–217). Thus the anti-brahmanical reinterpretations of the Aryan migration theory show that subaltern resistance is also possible through the active inversion of dominant discourses. Instead of aiming at a deconstruction or a fundamental denial of the Aryan migration theory, a radical inversion of the prevailing interpretation is sought, in order to derive from it an anti-Aryan, or anti-brahmanic polemic. Emancipatory inversions of this kind are also found in other contexts. So, for example, as King writes:

In Vivekānanda’s hands, Orientalist notions of India as ‘other worldly’ and ‘mystical’ were embraced and praised as India’s special gift to humankind. Thus the very discourse that succeeded in alienating, subordinating and controlling India was used by Vivekānanda as a religious clarion call for the Indian people to unite under the banner of a universalistic and all-embracing Hinduism. (King 1999: 93)<sup>68</sup>

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themselves more closely with the individual arguments proposed by the revisionists. Numerous factual errors and methodological weaknesses as well as insoluble contradictions with archaeological and philological findings have thereby been exposed. See, e.g., Bronkhorst & Deshpande (1999); Witzel & Farmer (2000a,b) Witzel (2001) Hock (2002), and a special double issue of *The Journal of Indo-European Studies* (30:3/4, 2002).

68. Fox (1992: 151–152) has shown in Gandhi an inverted interpretation similar to that of Vivekananda.

As forms of subaltern resistance such reinterpretations have been criticized in that their aim was not “truly revolutionary, that is, structural, change” (Arnold 1982: 131n.106). This reproach can however be raised against many types of resistance against dominant discourses and poses the fundamental question of the limits of possibility of subaltern resistance (Spivak 1985). It can be applied, for example, also to the subversive mimesis of colonial rulers by the colonized, as described by Homi Bhabha, or to the micropolitics of resistance of Michel de Certeau (Bhabha 1994: 85–92; de Certeau 1988). Structural limitations do not, however, necessarily mean a lack of social relevance.

It must nevertheless be said that the discursive terrain on which the confrontation with the Aryan migration theory takes place sets very narrow borders within which the social and political confrontations can take place. The reference points for developing identity-shaping discourses about Indian prehistory at the end of the 20th century are still Orientalist theories of the 19th century. Even the most recent attempt of Hindu nationalism reproduces in principle the structure of this originally colonial dominant discourse, in order to assert their challenge to the Aryan migration theory. This does not, however, hinder the revisionists of the Aryan migration theory from seeking recognition in and through academic institutions and bodies in India. This venture is by no means bound to fail, as shown by the influence already exerted by Hindu nationalists on university and education politics (e.g., Panikkar 2001). Moreover, the appropriation by nationalist ideologues of research in prehistory has many historical and contemporary parallels (Kohl & Fawcett 1995). Considerable resistance is to be expected, however, not only on the part of Indian universities, but above all also from anti-brahmanical movements.

This development has come at a point in time where a critically and methodologically reflective Indology and South Asian archaeology has begun to admit that their interpretations of Indian prehistory are “at best, hypotheses”, which “differ only in the degree of their probability” (Hock 2002: 247). The Aryan migration theory is now understood as a 19th-century Orientalist speculative concept containing more than a few unspoken and still unreflected presuppositions that have to be critically re-evaluated. Moreover, recent scholarly efforts to confront the Aryan migration theory by a theory of ‘Indigenous Aryanism’ (e.g., Bryant 2001) do not seem to be helpful either, as they perpetuate the very same implicit assumptions of the old Orientalist concept, and are also closely intertwined with political debates on identity because they parallel (and are even somewhat connected to) a Hindu nationalist rewriting of Indian religious pre-history as discussed above. Therefore, philology (Indology,

study of Indo-European linguistics etc.) and also South Asian archaeology have no alternative to reaching new theoretical formations that enable a conscious and categorical disconnection from old Orientalist paradigms and identity-forming discourses on Indian pre-history.

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## SUMMARY

During the British colonial regime in the 19th century Western Indologists and missionaries, with the participation of the indigenous scholars who controlled traditional systems of knowledge, formed models for the description of early religious history which was especially inspired by linguistic ideas whose central concept was the so-called 'Aryan immigration' into Northern India. This Orientalist historiography concerning events that lay back several thousand years found its way into political and religious discourse in one form or another. These projections developed into highly significant ingredients of the various political, ethnic, and religious movements and parties, such as the Dravidian Movement or the Nationalist Hindu groupings. The present paper tries to map out the corner stones of modern-day discourses concerning Indian pre- and early history which has developed into something of a veritable battle about the past..

## RÉSUMÉ

À l'époque de la domination coloniale britannique, au XIXe siècle, indologues occidentaux et missionnaires chrétiens, avec la participation des érudits autochtones, détenteurs du savoir ancestral, mirent en place des modèles afin de décrire l'histoire religieuse ancienne du sous-continent indien. Ces modèles s'inspiraient lourdement de la science linguistique, dont l'idée centrale était la soi-disante 'invasion aryenne'. Cette historiographie orientaliste, qui traitait d'événements remontant à plusieurs millénaires dans le passé, se retrouva par la suite, sous une forme ou une autre, dans les représentations politiques et religieuses. Elle joua un rôle important au sein de divers mouvements et partis, tels que le mouvement Dravidien ou les regroupements nationalistes Hindous. Le présent article cherche à identifier les points principaux de cette représentation moderne de la préhistoire et de l'histoire ancienne indiennes; représentation qui semble parfois devenir un combat portant sur le passé.

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Während der britischen Kolonialherrschaft im 19. Jahrhundert begründeten westliche Indologen und christliche Missionare unter Beteiligung Gelehrter der traditionellen einheimischen Wissenssysteme ein vor allem von Sprachwissenschaft inspiriertes Beschreibungsmodell der frühen südasiatischen Religionsgeschichte, dessen zentrale Idee die sogenannte "arische Einwanderung" war. Diese orientalistische Geschichtsschreibung über Ereignisse, die mehrere tausend Jahre zurücklagen, fand unter unterschiedlichen Vorzeichen Eingang in politische und religiöse Diskurse, und in der Folgezeit wurden diese Projektionen in hohem Maße Bestandteil des Selbstverständnisses verschiedenster politischer und religiöser Bewegungen und Parteien in Indien (z. B. in der dravidischen Bewegung und in hindu-nationalistischen Gruppierungen). Der Beitrag versucht die Eckpunkte dieses modernen Diskurses über die indische Vor- und Frühgeschichte, der im gegenwärtigen Indien geradezu zu einem Kampf um die Vergangenheit geworden ist, nachzuzeichnen.

### *Author's address:*

Michael Bergunder  
Religionsgeschichte und Missionswissenschaft  
Wissenschaftlich-Theologisches Seminar  
Universität Heidelberg  
Kisselgasse 1  
D-69117 HEIDELBERG  
G e r m a n y  
e-mail: michael.bergunder@urz.uni-heidelberg.de