

SYMPOSIUM ON ORIGINS OF CIVILIZATION

**Center for Indic Studies
University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth
U.S.A.**

July 8-9, 2011

Background

For nearly three centuries, India and its neighboring civilizations including those of Thailand, Indonesia and Cambodia have been studied from a European perspective. But today, following the end of European colonialism, both the perspective and the goals have changed. This is true particularly of India and her civilization, which is the parent of other civilizations of East and Southeast Asia.

The study of India by Western scholars began as an effort to understand Indian law and tradition to facilitate colonial rule. This led pioneer scholars like Sir William Jones to study Indian literature and the historical and political canon. Several centers and professorships were set up by the ruling powers to interpret India and her tradition and assist in the governance of their Indian subjects. These positions include the Boden Chair at Oxford, The Prince of Wales Professorship at Harvard (now called Wales Professorship) and others of the same kind.

What began as a purely utilitarian enterprise evolved into the academic subject known as Indology and its allied subject of Indo-European Studies. In view of its origins it is not surprising that Indology should have a colonial orientation and include biases from that era. The ending of European colonialism following the Second World War saw changes in Indology also but old methods and interpretations of Indian tradition continued for several decades. While the former *raison de etre* of interpreting India for the benefit colonial rulers disappeared, the methodologies created during the colonial era persisted for several decades. The discipline therefore does not fully reflect the change from colonization to one of global partnership that is the reality today.

It is only in the past two decades, with India emerging as a major political, economic and intellectual power with a strong presence in the West, especially in the United States, that a need for alternative approaches to the study of India and her contributions began to be felt. This is particularly urgent in view of the growing relationships between India and the United States across all fronts— from socio-political to economic, geo-strategic, scientific and commercial. This being the reality, it is clearly anachronistic to continue with models and methodologies created during the colonial era going back more than two centuries. New avenues need to be explored that take into consideration the changes that have taken place over the past half a century and more.

The need for re-examination and reformulation does not arise from the changed socio-political scene alone— different areas of science also have progressed enormously impacting our understanding of different civilizations, including the Indian. For example, it is now known, as was not a hundred years ago, that the abrupt ending of the last Ice

Age more than 10,000 years ago, followed by the two Dyases (Older and the Younger Dryas) had a major influence on the spread of agriculture and hence on civilization.

Going further back in time, it is now known that a massive volcanic eruption known as the Toba Explosion c. 70,000 years ago led to the virtual depopulation of South Asia. It took more than 20,000 years for a new wave of African immigrants to settle along the Indian coast, which evolved into the current population of India and Southeast Asia. Genetic studies (based on mtDNA and Y-chromosomes) show that the Indian gene pool has remained substantially the same since that time and has received little external input since the Holocene (post Ice Age.)

This suggests that history and civilization must be studied as an extension of natural history and not based exclusively on man-made theories from subjects like linguistics and philology. A major lesson of the past two decades is that reliance on man-made theories without the constraints of science can lead to highly inaccurate conclusions like race theories and imaginary migrations.

In summary, changes in the global socio-political environment as well as advances in science dictate a comprehensive re-examination and reformulation of history and civilization. The proposed Conference is a step in that direction. To begin with, it proposes to choose the Indic because Indian literary records are the oldest and the most extensive. Further, unlike with ancient civilizations, the Indic continues to the present as a living tradition.

In addition to shedding light on fundamental questions, it is expected that the Conference will make a contribution towards bringing together scholars from the sciences and the humanities.

Conference format and scope

The Conference will consist of both plenary sessions (of invited lectures) as well as sessions of contributed presentations, and workshop, and panel discussions. There will also be audio-visual demonstrations of interest. All viewpoints including those regarded as heretical will be entertained. Conference proceedings will be published. The goal is to make the Conference as inclusive as possible.

Any revision or proposal of a subject is best begun with an understanding of methods and approaches of the past, their strengths and weaknesses. In this case it means a critical analysis of the course of Indology and Indo-European Studies and their offshoots over the past two centuries. This includes beliefs as well as methods and

disciplines. This should be followed by new currents introduced into the study like archaeo-astronomy and archaeology in the in early decades of the twentieth century to ancient scripts and understanding of the impact of natural history and genetics. Hence the following areas and sub-areas will be explored from different points of view.

1 Two centuries of Indic Studies (suggested topic areas)

- 1.1 Indic studies from the colonial era to the era global partnership.
- 1.2 Sanskrit studies in India and the West: what ails Sanskrit studies in the West?
- 1.3 Aryan myths and their influence on history and historiography.
- 1.4 Genetics and migration theories.
- 1.5 Different interpretations of Indic religious thought.

2 Language, linguistics and computer science

- 2.1 Why no quantitative methods in Indo-European linguistics?
- 2.2 Have Proto-languages ever existed? Can a proof methodology be developed?
- 2.3 Paninian grammar and computational linguistics.
- 2.4 Can we develop a computational philology?

3 Natural history and origins of civilization

- 3.1 Pleistocene-Holocene transition.
- 3.2 Literary records of natural history (Younger Dryas, sea level rises, etc)
- 3.3 The Toba Explosion and its ramifications.
- 3.4 Beginning of agriculture and its impact on Indic civilization.

4 Archaeology and literature

- 4.1 Links between archaeology and Vedic literature
- 4.2 Vedic and Harappan chronology
- 4.3 Harappan iconography and symbolism
- 4.4 Harappan language and script.
- 4.5 Harappan and later scripts.

5 Science and philosophy

- 5.1 Vedanta and modern science.
- 5.2 Archaeo-astronomy as a chronological tool.
- 5.3 Evolution of number systems.
- 5.4 Metallurgy and material science.
- 5.5 Architecture and engineering.

6 Miscellaneous

Tentative Program and Schedule of the Symposium

Arrival afternoon of July 7

Inauguration 8 am, July 8

Presentations morning, afternoon, July 8

Workshop morning, July 9

Panel discussion afternoon, July 9

Closing dinner, July 9

Departure July 10