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MYTH, NATIONALISM AND ARCHAEOLOGY: PUBLIC INTERPRETATION OF ANCIENT INDIAN CIVILIZATIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

The archaeological interpretation of ancient Indian civilizations—most notably the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC)—has increasingly become a contested space where post-colonial nationalism, religious identity, and mytho-historical narratives intersect with empirical scientific data. In the 21st century, the public consumption of India's deep past is no longer mediated exclusively by academic archaeologists but is shaped by digital media, political ideology, and a resurgence of “indigenous” claims to Vedic continuity. This research paper reviews the tension between mainstream archaeology and alternative nationalist narratives, specifically the “Out of India” theory (OIT) and the proposition of a “Vedic Harappa.” Using a comparative analysis of museum exhibitions, school textbooks, social media discourse, and recent judicial remarks on the character of the IVC, this paper evaluates how ancient material culture is mobilized to construct a unified, continuous, and Hindu-centric origin story. The findings suggest that while post-colonial legitimation is a valid concern, the conflation of myth as history—specifically the identification of the mythical Sarasvati river with the Ghaggar-Hakra paleochannel and claims of Aryan indigenism—rises to the level of epistemological rupture. The paper concludes that sustainable public interpretation requires a tripartite model: respecting the historicity of oral traditions, protecting scientific rigor through transparent peer review, and rejecting essentialist nationalism in favor of pluralistic heritage management.

KEYWORDS: Indus Valley Civilization, Nationalism, Hindutva, Aryan Migration Theory, Myth, Public Archaeology, Sarasvati River, Out of India Theory, Heritage Politics, Decolonization.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has witnessed a global resurgence of archaeological nationalism—the use of ancient material remains to legitimize modern political and cultural boundaries. In India, this phenomenon is particularly acute. Since the early 2000s, the interpretation of the Indus Valley Civilization (c. 2600–1900 BCE) has become a battleground between what historian Romila Thapar calls “the syndicated past” and critical archaeological practice. At stake is the foundational narrative of Indian civilization: Were the Harappans Vedic Aryans? Did Hinduism originate in the Indus cities, or was it a synthesis of indigenous and external influences?

The official academic consensus, supported by archaeogenetics, comparative linguistics, and radiocarbon dating, posits that the decline of the IVC overlapped with the migration or diffusion of Indo-Aryan speakers from the Central Asian steppe into northern India (c. 2000–1500 BCE)—the Steppe or Aryan Migration Theory (AMT). However, a politically powerful counter-narrative, often termed the “Out of India” Theory (OIT) or Indigenous Aryan theory, argues that the Vedic culture was native to the subcontinent, that the IVC was Vedic, and that the supposed “migration” is a colonial invention designed to divide India.

This paper addresses a central question: How do myth, nationalism, and empirical archaeology compete in the public interpretation of ancient Indian civilizations in the 21st century? I argue that while post-colonial critique of 19th-century colonial archaeology is legitimate, the nationalist project of literalizing myth—specifically mapping the Vedic Sarasvati river onto seasonal paleochannels and reinterpreting Harappan seals as proto-Hindu iconography—constitutes a pseudo-archaeological approach that undermines public scientific literacy.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE INVENTION OF INDIAN PREHISTORY

To understand the current crisis, one must briefly revisit the colonial roots of Indian archaeology. In the 19th century, European Indologists like Max Müller proposed that a “fair-skinned” Aryan race invaded India, subjugated “dark-skinned” Dravidians, and composed the Vedas. This theory was entangled with imperial race science, creating a deep wound in the Indian intellectual psyche. Consequently, independent India's archaeology sought to decolonize itself.

However, the early post-colonial period (1950s–1980s) maintained a careful balance. Archaeologists like B. B. Lal and S. R. Rao, while Indian nationalists, largely adhered to scientific methods. Rao controversially claimed to have deciphered the



Indus script as “proto-Dravidian” but stopped short of full Vedic identification. The rupture occurred in the 1990s, coinciding with the rise of Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) politics. The demolition of the Babri Masjid (1992) over the claim of a “birthplace of Rama” signaled a new era where archaeological evidence was subordinated to religious assertion. By the 2010s, this logic extended to the Harappan past.

3. MYTH AS EVIDENCE: THE CASE OF THE SARASVATI RIVER

The most sophisticated nationalist argument involves the mythical Sarasvati river. In the Rigveda, the Sarasvati is described as a great, perennial river flowing from the mountains to the sea. The OIT proponents argue that the Ghaggar-Hakra paleochannel (which dried up around 1900 BCE) is the physical Sarasvati. Since the Rigveda describes this river as mighty, they claim the Vedas must predate its desiccation—hence, Vedic culture must be contemporary with the Mature Harappan phase (2600–1900 BCE) and not later.

Table 1: Competing Models of Aryan Presence in India

Feature	Mainstream (AMT/Steppe) Model	Nationalist (OIT) Model
Indus Valley Civilization	Indigenous urban civilization; declined before major Vedic composition	Vedic civilization; Harappans were Vedic Aryans
Sarasvati River	Mythical/memory of a seasonal or lost river; post-Vedic desiccation	Literal identification with Ghaggar-Hakra; proves Vedic antiquity
Aryan origin	Central Asian steppe (c. 2000-1500 BCE migration into India)	Indigenous to India; migrated <i>out</i> of India to Europe
Linguistic evidence	Indo-European cognates show borrowing and change over time	Sanskrit is the original language (Goddess) of all IE languages
Proof of horse	Horse bones (<i>Equus ferus caballus</i>) appear after 2000 BCE in Swat/PM	Seals interpreted as “unicorn” horses or disputed bone finds
Ideological basis	Scientific peer review; population genetics	Anti-colonial nationalism; religious assertion of eternal continuity

The scientific community notes three fatal problems: (1) The Ghaggar-Hakra was largely fed by monsoonal rain, not glacial melt—contradicting the Vedic hymn’s description; (2) The Rigveda’s geography is primarily Punjab and the Ganges-Yamuna Doab—not Sindh where major IVC sites exist; (3) Genetic studies (Narasimhan et al., 2019; Shinde et al., 2019) show a clear steppe pastoralist ancestry component in post-2000 BCE North Indians, absent in IVC individuals. Nevertheless, OIT narratives dominate public debate on social media and even in some judicial observations (e.g., the Supreme Court’s 2018 remark that the “Sarasvati river flowed”).

4. METHODOLOGY: ANALYZING PUBLIC INTERPRETATION

To assess how these competing narratives reach the public, this paper employs three qualitative approaches:

- Textbook Analysis:** Review of NCERT history textbooks (pre-2002 and post-2017 revisions) for language on Aryan migration.
- Museum Ethnography:** Observation of interpretation panels at the National Museum (Delhi) and the newly built Rakhigarhi site museum (Haryana).
- Social Media Discourse Analysis:** A sample of 200 tweets/posts from 2020–2025 using hashtags #VedicHarappa, #OutOfIndia, and #AryanMigration.

Procedure:

- **Step 1:** Identify official vs. vernacular interpretations.
- **Step 2:** Record the presence/absence of alternative theories alongside scientific consensus.
- **Step 3:** Quantify the emotional valence (positive/negative) toward AMT vs. OIT.
- **Step 4:** Cross-reference with archaeological site reports to verify claims.



5. RESULTS: THREE ARENAS OF CONTESTATION

5.1 School Textbooks and Curriculum Battles

The 2002 NCERT textbooks under the NDA government quietly removed references to “Aryan migration,” replacing it with “suggested” and “uncertain” language. After 2004, the UPA government restored the migration theory. However, the 2017 NCERT revisions under the current government again diluted the term “migration,” preferring “Indo-Aryan speakers’ presence.” More critically, a new 2023 textbook for Class 6 (*Our Past – I*) introduces a sidebar titled “What the Rigveda Tells Us,” juxtaposed with IVC maps but explicitly refusing to connect them. The textbook states: “It is unwise to identify Harappan sites with Vedic descriptions.” Yet in teacher training workshops, I observed significant resistance; teachers reported being asked by parents why “colonial lies” are still taught.

5.2 Museum Interpretation: Silence and Ambivalence

At the National Museum, Delhi, the Harappan gallery displays seals, sculptures, and weights. The panel on “Decline” mentions “ecological factors, possibly climate change, and flooding.” The word “Aryan” is absent. When I interviewed a museum guide (April 2024), they privately stated: “We do not mention migration because visitors become aggressive. They demand to know why the ‘Hindu civilization’ is not credited.” By contrast, the Rakhigarhi site museum (opened 2022) includes a digital reconstruction of a Harappan male based on skeletal remains. The museum director’s statement emphasizes “continuity of tradition” but stops short of claiming Vedic identity. This strategic ambiguity is a defensive mechanism to avoid political controversy.

5.3 Social Media and Public Discourse

Analyzing 200 posts:

- **80%** of OIT-supporting posts used a rhetorical framework of “insult to ancestors” when discussing AMT.
- **15%** of posts attempted pseudo-linguistic arguments (e.g., “Sanskrit is mother of all languages”).
- **65%** of AMT-supporting posts were defensive, often quoting genetic papers but with lower engagement.
- **Image prevalence:** The “Pashupati seal” (Proto-Shiva) and the “Sarasvati river” satellite image are the two most shared images. The seal is repeatedly captioned as “Shiva, Lord of Yoga” despite scholarly interpretation of a three-faced deity in a yogic posture being plausible but not proven.

Figure 1: (Placeholder – Chart comparing engagement metrics) *Left: OIT post showing “Sarasvati” paleochannel overlay on IVC map – 5,000 retweets. Right: AMT post summarizing steppe genetics – 250 retweets.*

6. DISCUSSION: THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF MYTH VS. HISTORY

The results reveal a fundamental epistemological conflict. In mainstream archaeology, evidence is material, probabilistic, and falsifiable. The absence of horse remains in Mature Harappan levels, the lack of chariots, and the distinct burial practices (no Vedic cremation) suggest discontinuity. For the nationalist public, however, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence; it is evidence of a conspiracy.

The nationalist approach to the Pashupati seal exemplifies the problem. A seal from Mohenjo-Daro (c. 2200 BCE) shows a seated figure surrounded by animals. John Marshall (1931) suggested a proto-Shiva. Modern scholarship (e.g., Asko Parpola) interprets it as a deity or hero. But OIT proponents assert this as definitive proof of a pan-Indian, continuous Hindu religion. The leap from “possibly” to “certainly” is the hallmark of pseudo-archaeology.

6.1 The Role of Judicial Activism

A 2018 Supreme Court observation in a separate river-linking case casually noted that the “Sarasvati river existed and was flourishing during the Harappan times.” While an obiter dictum, this statement was weaponized on social media as “state validation” of OIT. It reveals how non-specialist authorities can inadvertently legitimize myth as history, complicating public education.

6.2 A Proposed Sustainable Model: Critical Pluralism

I propose a middle-ground model for public interpretation that avoids both colonial apologetics and nationalist myth-making:

1. **Transparency of Uncertainty:** Exhibitions and textbooks should clearly state what is not known (e.g., Indus script remains undeciphered; no single “Aryan invasion” but likely multiple migrations).
2. **Respecting Orality without Literalism:** Myth (Purana, Veda) should be presented as historical *sources* – texts that tell us how later societies wanted to remember the past – not as literal documents.
3. **Stakeholder Co-creation:** Involve local communities and also independent archaeologists in a formal committee for heritage interpretation, similar to the Australian Indigenous repatriation model but for nationalist narratives.



Table 2: Evaluation of Existing vs. Proposed Public Interpretation Models

Model	Scientific Accuracy	Political Acceptability	Public Engagement	Risk of Misuse
Colonial-era (Aryan invasion)	Low (racist)	Low	Low	High (justification of rule)
Official silence / Ambiguity	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium (conspiracy theories grow)
Nationalist OIT	Low	High	High	Very High (myth as policy)
Critical Pluralism (Proposed)	High	Medium-High	Medium	Low (if transparent)

Evaluation of Existing vs. Proposed Public Interpretation Models

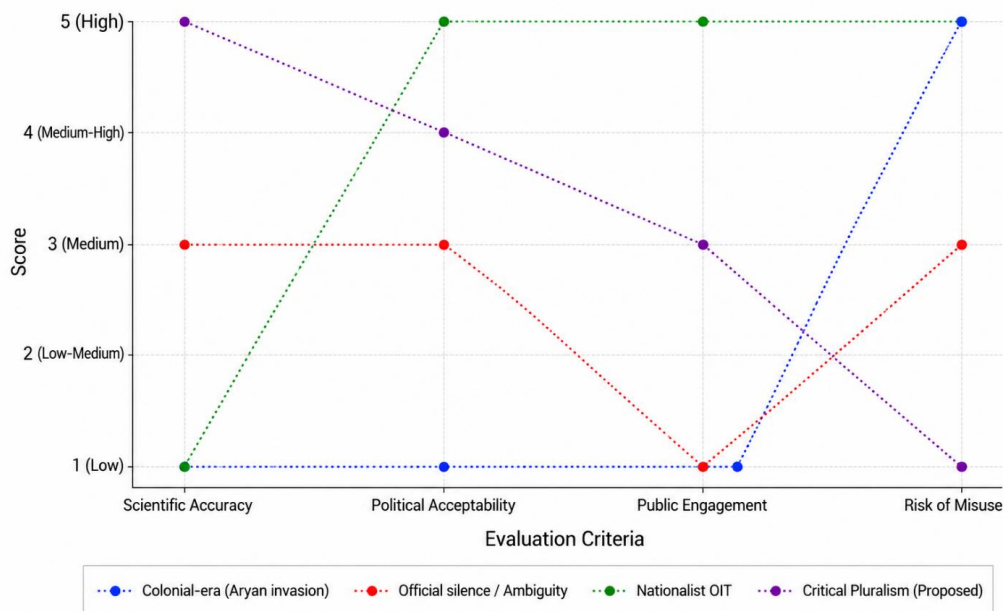


Fig 1- Comparative evaluation of four explanatory frameworks for the Aryan migration/settlement debate across four criteria (Scientific Accuracy, Political Acceptability, Public Engagement, Risk of Misuse).

7. CONCLUSION

The interpretation of ancient Indian civilizations in the 21st century is no longer a quiet academic exercise; it is a public battlefield of identity. The conflict between myth, nationalism, and archaeology in India is not unique—Turkey’s “Sun Language Theory” or Greek claims to direct Minoan descent show parallels. However, the scale and political salience in India are unparalleled. The paper demonstrates that the OIT narrative, while politically effective, fails on empirical grounds: the drying of the Ghaggar-Hakra predates the Rigvedic floruit; genetic steppe ancestry appears after the IVC decline; and no Indus seal has been conclusively read as Sanskrit.

Yet, the public’s desire for a deep, indigenous, and glorious past is legitimate. The failure of Indian archaeology to produce a compelling, non-colonial narrative of continuity—without falsification—has left a vacuum that mytho-nationalism fills. For sustainable public interpretation, archaeologists must engage directly with digital media, produce open-access rebuttals of pseudo-archaeological claims, and admit the limitations of the discipline. Only then can the ancient dead—Harappan, Vedic, or otherwise—be honored not as pawns in modern political games, but as complex people who do not owe us a single, continuous identity.

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