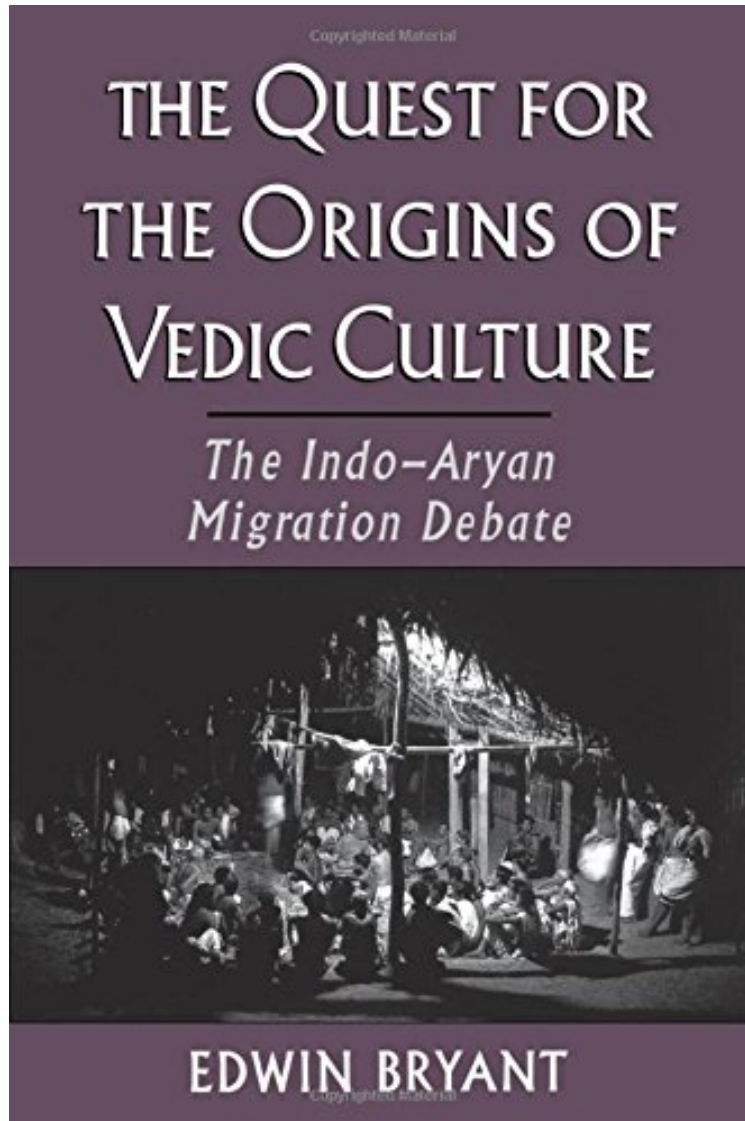


# The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate

*Edwin Bryant*

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**Edwin Bryant : The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate:

101 of 104 people found the following review helpful. A much-needed survey By A Customer I found this book to be a

remarkably even-handed and clearly written overview of a subject that has, bizarrely enough, produced much impassioned debate in the past several hundred years -- the problem of the origins of the Indo-European language family. What is primarily a linguistic problem has been commandeered by missionaries, nationalists of varying stripes, racists, and even Nazis to produce a peculiar body of thought about a so-called "Aryan race" both in Europe and India. Even highly-trained scholars have indulged in circular reasoning, the conflation of disparate bits of evidence, and outright fantasy in their attempts to postulate and prove their answers to the questions posed by the undoubted similarities of the various languages in this far-flung group. One of the tenets of the conventional, European view is that a group of Indo-European-speaking nomads entered India around 1200 BC and then proceeded to spread their language and culture throughout the northern half of this subcontinent. Beyond the existence of Sanskrit and the Prakrits themselves, the evidence for this movement of people has always been sparse; the reasoning displayed by those determined to prove that this influx existed has generally been flawed -- rough guesses have been turned into proven facts, and these so-called facts then used as the basis for more guesses. This entire controversy might seem of no interest to anyone outside of a handful of academics, but unfortunately, the early and false conflation of language and race has been partly responsible for the deaths of a great many innocent people. Ideas can be fatal in the wrong minds. Bryant attempts to strip away the muddled thinking that surrounds the "Aryan influx" theory. First, he analyzes the theory itself and discusses its history -- which is primarily a history of colonial exploitation by the British and indigenous exploitation as well, by the upper castes. Bit by bit he examines the evidence that has been brought forward in support of the theory and displays just how inadequate it is. Most of the "sure things" invoked by scholars through the centuries, right up into the last decade, are not sure at all. Many could easily be used to prove the opposite theory, that the language and culture of northern India developed in place, as it were, from some vague Paleolithic or Mesolithic beginning. I decided to write this review partly because I was startled by the other reviewer here, who seems not have finished Bryant's last chapter. Rather than dismissing the Indigenous Aryan theory or linking it solely with Hindutva, the current Hindi nationalist movement, Bryant takes pains to show that many serious scholars and prehistorians also uphold the theory or at least, have found huge holes in the fabric of the opposing, Aryan Migration, theory. Over and over he repeats that he does not mean to dismiss the solid thinkers and their theories. In fact, when I first read the book the constant repetitions of his support for serious holders of the Indigenous Aryan theory annoyed me; they seemed like overkill. I understand why he repeated himself now. While he himself thinks that the evidence for a migration is stronger than that for indigenous development, he makes it amply clear just how weak the evidence for both theories is. He does, however, have a little fun with the most far-fetched fringe writers on the subject, some of whom have floated ideas that deserve mockery. I did have a few minor problems with the book, but those must be laid at the door of Oxford University Press. The book contains so many typos that I can only suppose it wasn't proofread by a professional. The paper is so thin that the printer was forced to use dark gray ink instead of black to avoid show-through, a real nuisance for those of us whose eyes aren't what they used to be. For a book of this price, this kind of penny-pinching is inexcusable.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. The ancient history of Vedic ancestors

By Rama Rao

The Indo-Aryan migration debate has been going on ever since European scholars claimed (in later part of 19 century) that the practitioners of the Vedic rituals and the authors of RgVeda were "Aryans" of European ancestry. Despite the images of tall blonde, soma belching Germanic supermen riding their chariots, hooting and tooting their trumpets as they trampled the inferior aboriginal dasas of ancient India, numerous Indian scholars have challenged this theory. This debate is not over since the evidence obtained from philology, archeology and internal evidences gleaned from RgVeda provides a forum for contrasting interpretations.

A brief summary of the book is as follows: This book may be broadly classified into two sections that deal with the discussions about the identity of the Vedic ancestors, and the date of the earliest writings of RgVeda. Scholars are divided over the earliest writings of RgVeda but some estimates put this date to be around 1500 BCE. At this time, the Indo-Aryans were a separate entity from Iranians that descended from a larger Indo-Iranian population. This conclusion is largely based on the similarities in the linguistics of RgVeda and Avesta (sacred texts of Zoroastrianism). The separation of two populations may have occurred as early as 2200 BCE. In contrast to this theory, some authors have suggested, based on astronomical data of RgVeda, the earliest writings to an earlier date of 2500 BCE. The references to the river Sarasvati in RgVeda makes the strongest suggestion that Vedic ancestors were present in the mature Harappan period.

With regards to the origin of Vedic people, more far reaching conclusions could be drawn based recent genetic studies and the origin of the Indo-European language (1). Most indigenous tongues spoken today, from Hindi to Italian, English to Russian and Spanish to Greek belong to one parent Indo-European language. This classification is based on shared features of vocabulary and grammar. To identify indigenous population in ancient Eurasia, archeologists used distinctive types of pottery and cultural practices associated with burials and settlements into individual "archaeological cultures". Significantly, animal grave offerings were made (cattle, sheep, goats and horse), a feature associated with Proto-Indo-Europeans, and later by the Vedic ancestors. However, it hasn't been clear whether there is a genetic basis for these group boundaries or whether they're just cultural. Recent genetic analysis reveal that this group of pastoralists with domestic horses and oxen-drawn wheeled carts were responsible for up to 75% of the genomic DNA seen in Indo-European cultures about 4,500 years ago. The study identified a massive

migration of herders and farmers from the Yamna culture of the north of the Black and Caspian Seas (Ukraine). This is called the "Steppe hypothesis." This would have favored the expansion of at least a few of these Indo-European languages throughout the Eurasia. This "steppe" expansion explains the intriguing link of modern Indo-European languages to one mother language. It is also quite likely that the Indo-European languages spoken in India and Iran were probably diverged from those spoken by the Yamna people before they blazed a trail into Eastern and Central Europe. Recent archeological evidences also favor these findings. In 2009, a 6,000-year-old ancient 'cathedral' was discovered in Ukraine near modern-day Nebelivka. The place of worship contained altars and burnt bones of lambs as well as humanlike figurines (gods) shedding light on practices within a huge prehistoric settlement. Some of these practices were carried through the Vedic period in India. Another genetic analysis suggest that humanity's most recent common male ancestor, the "father" of us all, would have lived between 174,000 and 321,000 years ago (2). These studies give an overall picture of human evolution and population migrations. Perhaps in few short years to come, we can solve the puzzle of the ancestry of Indo-Aryans more precisely. The author reviews the literature thoroughly and presents a contrasting picture that emerges in the ancient history of India and the roots of Vedic culture. This book is of great interest for those interested in the ancient history of India and the earliest period of modern Hinduism.

Reference: 1. Wolfgang Haak et al. Massive migration from the steppe was a source for Indo-European languages in Europe. *Nature*, 2015; DOI: 10.1038/nature143172. Agnar Helgason, et al. The Y-chromosome point mutation rate in humans. *Nature Genetics*, 2015; DOI: 10.1038/ng.31710

0 people found the following review helpful. his book is not an easy read, but anyone who sticks with it will ...By Ballet Fan Edwin Bryant does an admirable job of presenting both sides of the debate over the origins of Vedic culture (Migrationists versus Indigenists), despite the fact that the debate is highly contentious, especially in India. He presents the evidence (linguistic and archaeological) and the ideology (Western and Indian) in separate chapters and concludes each chapter with a summary of the strengths and weaknesses of each case. Due to Bryant's scrupulous attention to all sides of the issue, his book is not an easy read, but anyone who sticks with it will have gained a very thorough understanding of 1) the current state of investigation into Vedic origins, 2) the reasons for the inconclusiveness of existing evidence, and 3) the techniques that various ideologically-motivated partisans have used to try to interpret the evidence in favor of their own premature conclusions. Because of the inability of the disciplines of archaeology and linguistics to resolve contradictions between the linguistic and archaeological evidence, the origin of Vedic culture remains one of the biggest mysteries of human prehistory. Unless the Indus Script can be deciphered, or undisputed remains of Proto-Indo-European culture excavated outside India, Vedic origins are likely to remain obscure.

Western scholars have argued that Indian civilization was the joint product of an invading Indo-European people--the "Indo-Aryans"--and indigenous non-Indo European peoples. Although Indian scholars reject this European reconstruction of their country's history, Western scholarship gives little heed to their argument. In this book, Edwin Bryant explores the nature and origins of this fascinating debate.

"A balanced description and evaluation of the two century old debate dealing with the origins of the Indo-Aryan speaking peoples of South Asia. [Bryant] presents both sides of the issue, that is the traditional western, linguistic, and philological consensus of immigration from Central Asia, and the more recent Indian position that denies any immigration and that asserts an indigenous South Asian origin. He probes for loopholes on both sides of the argument and presents the multi-faceted evidence from linguistics, archaeology, texts, etc. in an even-handed manner. As such, the book not only is an important and very welcome introduction into recent Indian historical thought but also a valuable heuristic tool in re-evaluating many of the unspoken or un-reflected presuppositions on both sides."--Michael Witzel, Harvard University

"The problem of Indo-Aryan origins has vexed scholars in both India and the West for well over a century and has touched every nerve of both academic and political discourse, so much so that many in the West have automatically dismissed any arguments to come 'out of India'[this book] investigates how these two worlds of scholarship came into being and systematically exposes the logical weaknesses of most of the arguments that support the consensus of either side. This is not only an important work in the field of Indo-Aryan studies but a long overdue challenge for scholarly fair play."--J.P. Mallory, Queen's University of Belfast". . . [A] groundbreaking book. . . [Bryant] does an extraordinary job of showing the ambiguity and uncertainty of both linguistic and archeological evidence for either a migration of indigenous presence of 'Aryans' in India (little has been convincingly proved or disproved). . . . A must get for libraries and must read for interested scholars."--Religious Studies About the Author Edwin Bryant is at Harvard University.