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THE DRAVIDIAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDIAN CIVILIZATION: A CALL FOR A REASSESSMENT*

ANDRÉE F. SJÖBERG

This paper examines the contribution of the Dravidian peoples to the development of Indian civilization and, more particularly, Hinduism. Given the grand scope of this subject, I can only sketch the general contours of my argument regarding the available evidence and articulate some of the reasons for believing these data must be given due recognition. At the very least many aspects of the traditional view of the role of the Dravidians stand in need of re-evaluation.

This essay represents an attempt to synthesize a wide variety of data, including some sociolinguistic materials, so as to highlight certain overall patterns. It must of necessity bypass certain important issues which could only be treated in a full-length book.

Why this need for a revisionist perspective? Unfortunately, the image of the Dravidians, who have been a minority group (from the perspective of social power), has been considerably distorted in the works of many scholars of Indian civilization—be they Indians or, especially, Westerners. Indeed, early Indian history was largely compiled from the vantage point of the conquerors rather than of the conquered (the non-Aryan peoples). Until quite recently these patterns of interpretation were reinforced by a body of Western scholars who, for reasons of their own, espoused and in some cases even identified with the traditional Aryan perspective on Indian history. More particularly, they assumed that Indian civilization has been mainly Aryan in its origin and development.¹

This pro-Aryan orientation is reflected even in current writings. As recently as 1980 the widely cited scholar O'Flaherty *

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(1980a:xviii) avowed, albeit in a passing remark, that "the ancient Indians, after all, were Indo-Europeans par excellence." Are we expected to believe that the ancient Indians were primarily Indo-Europeans? Hardly. This kind of unfortunate remark supports my contention that the significance of the non-Aryan, and especially the Dravidian, element in Indian history has yet to be sufficiently appreciated.

However, in recent decades a minority of Indologists have voiced the need for an alternative perspective. During the past twenty years I have also sought in a modest way to correct the record. I recall rather vividly in the 60s and early 70s certain prominent Indologists dismissing my views regarding the importance of the Dravidian component in Indian culture as misguided or ill-informed. Although I expect my current arguments to be challenged, there is clearly a greater receptiveness today to acknowledgement of the Dravidian contribution to the development of Indian civilization.

In order to deal with the main problem of the paper—i.e., the contribution of the Dravidian peoples to the formation and development of Indian civilization—certain background data are in order. First, it is necessary to document the shifting orientation of Indologists, especially in the West, towards the historical role of the Dravidians. Second, we shall examine briefly some of the problems concerning the nature of the evidence that we are seeking to interpret. Third, before we can consider the contribution of the Dravidians, we need to establish just who they are. All of this sets the stage for the discussion of the Dravidian component in the development of Indian civilization, and Hinduism in particular.

*Changing Perspectives of Western Scholars on the Role of the Dravidians*

The important earlier works of this century exhibited a general neglect of the non-Aryan, essentially Dravidian, contribution to Hinduism and Indian civilization in general. Zimmer's *Philosophies of India* (1951) (based on his last lectures in the early 1940s and seemingly representing a break with his earlier writings) made him an exception among these scholars in that he recognized the crucial role of the non-Aryan element in the philosophical traditions of India. However, although this book is
viewed as a classic work, the implications of his arguments concerning the Dravidians seem to have been generally ignored. Renou’s *Religions of Ancient India* (1953), while it does tend to glorify the Vedic period, offers many bits of evidence of the importance of the non-Aryan component in the later Hinduism. However, the discussion is poorly organized and presented in such a low key that the non-Aryan dimension does not clearly emerge. Nor does the author mention the Dravidians *per se* more than once or twice. Basham’s widely cited monograph, *The Wonder that was India* (1968; first published in 1954), likewise refers to the Dravidians in only a few places (although he gives some attention to ancient Tamil literature). Also, it greatly underplays the role of the Dravidians and at times presents a negative image of them.2 Or consider the widely-used textbook edited by Elder, *Lectures in Indian Civilization* (1970). The book includes some selections on Tamil literature and South Indian *bhakti* and very briefly treats the South Indian marriage system. But nowhere in this lengthy work does the reader gain an indication of the crucial role played by the Dravidians in the development of Hinduism and of Indian civilization as a whole. Another widely used textbook on Hinduism, Hopkins’ *The Hindu Religious Tradition* (1971), implicitly recognizes the non-Aryan component when it speaks of the challenge to the Brahmanical religion from the popular religious traditions, but the existence of the Dravidians *per se* is barely acknowledged. Significantly, the author labels the post-Vedic developments that arose in response to pressures from the popular traditions as “the new Brahmanism” (e.g., p. 63)!

Recently, however, some changes in these traditional patterns have been discernible. Basham, in his “Aryan and Non-Aryan in South Asia” (1979), presented a very different picture of the Dravidians than he did twenty-five years earlier. In this later work he proceeded on the assumption that their role in the development of Indian civilization has been a crucial one.

Allchin and Allchin, in *The Rise of Civilization in India and Pakistan* (1982), now simply take it for granted that the Dravidians were a significant factor in the formation of Indian civilization. Contrast this with their 1968 work. And we find Staal (1983) attributing aspects of the Vedic ritual to non-Aryan sources.
Crucial to this gradual modification of approach has been the work of Burrow, Emeneau, and Kuiper (see discussion farther on) in presenting "hard" linguistic data which seem to place at least some Dravidians in northwestern India at the time of the arrival of the Aryans and during the period of the composition of the body of Vedic scripture. But also significant in helping to turn the tide of opinion have been the recent works of specialists in Tamil culture, particularly Hart (1973, 1975, 1980) and Zvelebil (1973, 1975). These scholars have, however, focused on one group, the Tamils, and are less apt to speak of Dravidian influences in general. Among Westerners the scholar who comes closest to articulating my own general position concerning the critical role of the Dravidians in Hinduism and Indian civilization is Tyler, a highly respected anthropologist. In *India: An Anthropological Perspective* (1973:68) he observed that

Aryan orthodoxy was obliterated by heterodoxy, and even though the heterodox cults themselves eventually declined, the pattern of Aryan dominance was forever shattered. Remnants of Aryan culture were to survive the destruction but only in "Dravidianized" form. In every cultural sphere the ancient Dravidian forms reasserted themselves, transmogrifying Aryan doctrines and conventions, reducing Aryan gods to Dravidian gods, replacing the Aryan cult of the family altar with the Dravidian temple, subordinating ritualism to devotionalism, transforming class divisions into caste distinctions, and welding loosely knit tribal confederacies into centralized empires. The Hindu synthesis was less the dialectical reduction of orthodoxy and heterodoxy than the resurgence of the ancient, aboriginal Indus civilization. In this process the rude, barbaric Aryan tribes were gradually civilized and eventually merged with the autochthonous Dravidians. Although elements of their domestic cult and ritualism were jealously preserved by Brāhman priests, the body of their culture survived only in fragmentary tales and allegories embedded in vast, syncretistic compendia. *On the whole, the Aryan contribution to Indian culture is insignificant.* The essential pattern of Indian culture was already established in the third millennium B.C., and . . . the form of Indian civilization perdured and eventually reasserted itself. (Italics supplied.)

Some Comments on the Data and Method

One of the problems encountered in studying ancient historical patterns is obviously the paucity of reliable information. The fragile nature of the data is exacerbated in India by the fact that
the early records were written mainly on perishable substances such as palm leaf, and this long remained a tradition in the subcontinent.

But there are other problems as well. Until recently the amount of archaeological research was modest at best. Also, only in the past half century has a crucial body of linguistic evidence of the Dravidian impact on Aryan languages been brought to light.

Another stumbling block has been the fact of overspecialization in Indology. Western Indologists have traditionally been Sanskritists or oriented to an Aryan-Sanskritic bias. At the other pole, a number of scholars have concentrated on Dravidian language and culture (and quite recently we have seen a growing interest of Western specialists in Tamil culture). But few there are who have taken the broader view, seeking to interpret the bits and pieces of historical data within a pan-Indian framework. What is needed is a gestalt perspective toward Indian civilization, one that takes into account a wide variety of linguistic and cultural (including archaeological) data for the subcontinent as a whole and, further, one which seeks to place the subcontinent within its broader Eurasian setting.

As to methodology, much of my argument rests upon “reasoning through elimination” (cf. Durkheim, 1951). That is, the fragmentary nature of the data has often led me to examine a number of alternative explanations for major developments in Indian civilization. Implicit in my argument is the question: “Which explanation best accounts for the data at hand?” and then I eliminate those that seem least plausible. It is mainly through this method that I have concluded that the Dravidians must have been a major force in the formation of that loose aggregate of cultural patterns we call Hinduism. A major facet of the argument is that many key features of Hinduism lack any counterpart in the Indo-European culture as it has been reconstructed by scholars. On the other hand, few of these items can be clearly connected to any non-Aryan culture but that of the Dravidians.

Who Are the Dravidians?

There has been a tendency to assume that speakers of “Aryan” languages today are necessarily “Aryan” in their cultural and racial heritage. In point of fact, the majority of the ancestors of
Indo-Aryan speakers must at one time have spoken non-Aryan languages, mainly those belonging to the Dravidian family.

At the time the Aryans entered India (undoubtedly in a series of different waves of migrations) they must have been few in number compared to the indigenous population. Although they were a semi-nomadic people with a fairly simple culture they were technologically superior in certain respects—they had horses and chariots and superior weaponry, making it possible for them to conquer the peoples in the northwestern part of the subcontinent. They may have played some part in the demise of the Indus Valley cities. On the other hand, they themselves had not reached the level of civilization—i.e., they did not have cities or writing or the social arrangements that typically accompany these developments.

But who were the peoples already settled in the northwestern part of the subcontinent at the time of the Aryan invasions? For this we have only skimpy archaeological or historical evidence. Earlier it was assumed that Munda-speaking peoples were the key non-Aryan entity encountered by the Aryans. However, this cannot be supported by the available data. Munda loanwords in the Vedas are not sufficiently numerous to indicate that Munda speakers had a significant impact on the authors of these works. On the other hand, Burrow found about twenty Dravidian loanwords in the oldest Veda alone, and Emeneau and Kuiper (see farther on) have discussed the probable effects of the Dravidian languages on the oldest Aryan texts. The linguistic evidence for Dravidian impact grows increasingly strong as we move from the Samhitās down through the later Vedic works and into the classical post-Vedic literature.

Also, the available data indicate that the Munda-speaking people have generally constituted small, fragmented preliterate communities whose cultural power and influence has been limited at best. In contrast, the Dravidians have long been the dominant and most numerous of the non-Aryan peoples in India. Undoubtedly some Dravidians were accepted into the Brāhman fold even during the period of the Vedas. According to Meenakshi (1985:211-212) several Vedic hymns were composed by non-Aryans. Kuiper (1967:87) holds that the existence of several non-Aryan names among the Vedic priests proves that members of indigenous groups had been adopted into the Aryan commu-
nity. In the post-Vedic period, in the time of Manu, “Dravidians were acceptable as Aryans if they performed the necessary penances and rituals” (Basham, 1979:5). And Vyasa, the “Great Redactor” of the Vedas, was mainly non-Aryan in ancestry (Chatterji, 1965:55-57).

Examination of the early Tamil literature indicates that the Tamil-speaking peoples in South India had developed a fairly advanced culture by the time of the first recorded contacts with Aryans a little over two thousand years ago. They had large towns and capital cities and a complex social structure. They also developed a unique literature, the Sangam poetry, which dates from just before the beginning of the present era. The Tamil urban culture at that time seems to have qualified in every way but one for designation as a true civilization. The exception is that there is no evidence that the Tamils used writing until after it was introduced by the Aryans in about 200 B.C.E. However, given the advanced stage of the Tamil culture at the time of the first Aryan contacts, it is not unlikely that some experiments had earlier been made by the Tamils in the direction of writing.

In the light of these various linguistic and cultural data it is difficult to see how some Indologists such as Hock (1975) can assume that the non-Aryan influences on Indo-Aryan came mainly from the Munda-speaking peoples. In contrast to the Dravidians, who included large, settled populations, some of whom were on the verge of developing a true civilization, the Mundas have been relatively small, scattered preliterate groups. As to the Aryans, it is obvious from the many cultural and linguistic changes that have occurred over time in North India and the modifications in the racial make-up of the Aryan-speaking people that a great deal of intermixture with the indigenous population has taken place. The dominant element in this pre-Aryan population were the Dravidians. There are no other contenders among peoples known to us.

Dravidian Origins

Let us now turn more specifically to the question of the origins and nature of the Dravidian peoples—their linguistic, cultural, and racial background. Some time ago I wrote a survey essay on this subject (Sjoberg, 1971) and, so far as I am aware, no one has
sought to update this summary by incorporating findings since that time. The information on some areas today is more abundant, allowing me to place that synthesis on a firmer foundation. In that essay I argued that in terms of their physical type the Dravidians, though they are a mixed people who include an important proto-Australoid element, are primarily a darker skinned variety of the Mediterranean Caucasoids, most of whom are found in southern Europe and the Middle East. Their languages may be connected with Elamite, which was once spoken in the area of present-day Iran. However, there is stronger evidence linking the Dravidian languages with Uralic in northern Asia (and parts of Europe) and to some extent Altaic in central and eastern Asia. Caldwell advanced this thesis in 1856, but it was not taken seriously for more than a century. Then a few scholars began to add to the data, and in the past decade or two the theory has truly been revived. In 1968 Tyler listed some important Dravidian-Uralic cognates in root words. But the salient work in this field is the unpublished dissertation of Marlow (1974), who presented data that are powerful enough to bring many skeptics around to this view. Trained in Dravidian languages she was also a native speaker of Finnish who was able to make extensive use of the Etymological Dictionary of Uralic, which is in the Finnish language. She then systematically compared the root words therein with those in Burrow and Emeneau’s A Dravidian Etymological Dictionary (and Supplement) (1961, 1968). Tyler (1986) in a recent unpublished paper seems persuaded by Marlow’s data. And he speaks of “an unbroken chain of interconnected cultures stretching from Central Asia to Central India.” If correct, this would reduce the importance of the geographic distance between Dravidian and Uralic as the main stumbling block to acceptance of the possibility of relationship between the two linguistic groups.

But there are other pieces to the puzzle of Dravidian origins. It is significant that whereas the Dravidian kinship terminology has cognates with Ural-Altaic (Tyler, 1986), the Dravidian kinship system itself finds its closest parallels with that of certain Australian peoples, primarily the Kariera.8

On the other hand, more general cultural patterns—in particular the archaeological findings—provide evidence of an earlier cultural substratum extending from South India through the
Indian subcontinent and into the Middle East and southeastern Europe. Hord (1987) speaks of the configuration Mother Goddess-Son/Consort-Bull-Mountain as having once been widespread in this area. Devotion to a mother goddess and other female deities, often found in conjunction with cattle rituals and snake worship, is prominent still in India in areas with a strong non-Aryan substratum.

What are we to make of the fact that the racial, cultural, and linguistic data point in different directions as possible areas of origin for that entity we call “Dravidian”? First, the linguistic data point to Central and Northern Asia (if we follow the theory of Dravidian connections with Ural-Altaic). (Or they lead us to the Middle East, and perhaps earlier to Central Asia, in the case of the Elamite hypothesis.) Second, the Dravidian culture is very likely an amalgam of patterns drawn from a variety of cultural groups who intermingled in or near the South Asian area prior to the Aryan migrations into India. Third, the Dravidian-speaking peoples today are a mixture of several racial sub-types, though the Mediterranean Caucasoid component predominates. No doubt many of the subgroups who contributed to what we call Dravidian culture will be forever unknown to us. Nevertheless, Allchin and Allchin (1982) connect several different streams of prehistoric culture in India with the Dravidians. As the archaeological record becomes more complete additional pieces of the puzzle may fall together. Still, the complexity of the question of Dravidian origins must be kept in mind as we proceed to analyze the probable impact of the Dravidians on the formation and development of Indian civilization.

The Dravidian Impact on Hinduism

In attempting to assess the Dravidian contribution to Hinduism it is necessary to examine the problem within a broad time frame. Only the general thrust of my argument can be set forth here, but it is clear that my interpretations differ somewhat from those of traditional Indologists.

As an aid to interpretation of the historical materials I shall utilize Redfield’s “typology” of the Great and the Little Traditions⁹ as an organizing framework.
The Great Tradition

Most of my attention will be focused upon the Great, rather than the Little, Tradition. As for the Great Tradition, it is important for purposes of analysis to separate out the Early Vedic from the Later Vedic and the Post-Vedic periods. Although some specialists would not identify the Early Vedic period with Hinduism, designating it by a separate term, Vedism, the early period does provide a foundation for understanding certain later developments in Hinduism. As will be observed under the discussion of the Later Vedic and the Post-Vedic periods, one finds a differentiation between “revealed scripture” (Sruti) and “popular scripture” (Småiti). Some of the latter began to emerge in the Later Vedic period, but they continued to be important in the Post-Vedic era.

The Early Vedic Period. I use the designation “Early Vedic” to refer to the period of the Samhitas (the oldest texts). The earliest of these, the Rg Veda, stands somewhat apart from the others in terms of its mainly Aryan (i.e., Indo-European) content. Some non-Aryan (mainly linguistic) influence in the Rg Veda can be discerned, but a non-Aryan component seems more apparent in the later Samhitas, particularly the Atharva Veda, which includes some hymns that anticipate the Upanisads. As to the term “Later Vedic,” it is used herein to refer to the period of the commentaries on the Samhitas, in particular the Upanisads.

The Vedas, the oldest literary records in India, are in Sanskrit, or Old Indo-Aryan, which belongs to the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European family of languages. Thus the linguistic connections of Sanskrit are to be found outside of India, and mainly to the west. Other evidence strongly supports the assumption that the speakers of Sanskrit, who called themselves Āryas, were racially and culturally connected with peoples in the Middle East and in Europe, and most particularly the ancient Iranians. Mainly because the oldest Veda, the Rg Veda, seems to have been composed not long after the middle of the second millennium B.C.E., it has long been assumed that its authors entered northwestern India, or the general region of the upper Indus River Valley, roughly about that date. However, this view is increasingly being challenged. Burrow and Kuiper (see discussion farther on) ar-
gued strongly that the number of linguistic changes that had taken place in oldest Indo-Aryan since the common Indo-Iranian stage was considerable, which indicates that a wide interval must have elapsed between the entry of the Aryans into the Indian subcontinent and the composition of the first Vedic hymns—though, as Chatterji (1951, 1959) pointed out, racial and cultural fusion between the Aryans and the non-Aryans could already have begun before the Aryans reached India, perhaps in the area of eastern Iran. Adding to the complexity of the arguments, Fairservis and Southworth (1986) contend that the Aryans who composed the Vedas must have been preceded in northwestern India by still earlier Indo-Aryan peoples.

Still, there are important features of the Vedic religion that seem to have connections with the broader Indo-European culture and thus can be labeled “Ṛg Vedic Aryan.” The following is a brief summary of the salient features of the early Vedic religion, many of which soon disappeared or underwent transformation, though some others have been sustained over time.

The focus of the Aryan cult was sacrifice. There were domestic cults centered mainly about the hearth with rites performed by the head of the household. Aspects of these have continued to the present day. The Ṛg Vedic texts do, however, refer mainly to large-scale sacrifices of animals involving complex rites and participation by a variety of priest-specialists. The chief purpose of the sacrifice was to please the gods and thus obtain special favors from them. The rituals and the formulae that could attract the deities to the sacrifice and induce them to grant such boons were known only to the priests.

The Aryan gods represented and controlled the forces of nature. The most prominent of these deities were celestial gods—those who represented the sky, the sun, and aspects associated with the sky such as rain, clouds, or the wind. Many of the deities had counterparts in the religions of other Indo-Europeans such as the Iranians, the Greeks, the Romans, and some of the Germanic peoples. One was Varuṇa, who corresponded to an Iranian deity later known as Ahura Mazda. Though he was associated with the sky and rain, Varuṇa was mainly the guardian of the cosmic order and the overseer of moral action. “The proper course of things,” in the eyes of Varuṇa, became the standard for
the cosmic, moral, and liturgical order (ṛta). (Many scholars assume the origins of the later dharma to lie in the early Vedic ṛta.)

Already in the Rg Veda, and increasingly in later Vedic texts, interest shifted away from Varuna (and from Indra, the greatest of the Rg Vedic gods) to focus on the terrestrial devas, who were dominated by the divinized elements of the fire sacrifice: primarily Agni, the god of fire, Brhaspati, the divine cultic priest, and Soma, the most important libation in the sacrificial ritual. Of these three, Agni survives today in an attenuated form in the non-Aryan (mainly Dravidian) based pūjā. Furthermore, important aspects of certain life cycle rituals which were performed in the Vedic period are still perpetuated in India along with the appropriate Vedic mantras.

Renou (1953) believed that the Aryan religious system (which he called Vedism and treated as a separate religion from the later Hinduism) arose within a cultural vacuum. He argued that little in Vedism was inherited or borrowed and that it developed while the Aryans were living “in seclusion” in the upper Indus region. But it seems more than questionable that the Aryans could not have been influenced by the peoples they encountered in northwestern India, especially in light of the fact that at least some Aryan groups must have been in the Indus Valley region during the waning days of the Indus civilization. This was a civilization in the full sense (though we have only the skinniest of written records, none of which has yet been deciphered). Many experts assume that the Indus script very likely represents an early form of Dravidian, and it may be significant that surviving still today in the lower Indus Valley region are the Dravidian-speaking Brahuis. Still, the script may represent some language group unknown to us.

Renou did not take account of the work of Burrow (1945, 1946, 1947-1948), which suggested Dravidian sources for around five hundred Sanskrit words, including about twenty in the oldest Veda. Later work by Burrow (1955:386-387) and by Burrow and Emeneau (especially 1961, 1968) modified and added to the list somewhat. Emeneau (1956, 1962, 1974) and Kuiper (1967) also pointed to some evidence for grammatical borrowings from Dravidian into Old Indo-Aryan, including Vedic Sanskrit. (The influence of a "Dravidian model" on the grammar of the succeed-
ing stages of Indo-Aryan is very apparent (see, e.g., Katre, 1964). In addition, both scholars considered the existence in Old Indo-Aryan of a new set of phonemes—a series of retroflex consonants that contrast with dentals—to be mainly attributable to Dravidian influence; at the very least, the borrowing of Dravidian lexical items triggered a rearrangement of the Indo-Aryan phonological structure. Emeneau (1962) also argued that a logical source of retroflexes in Indo-Aryan was the Dravidian speakers’ interpretation of allophones of Old Indo-Aryan in terms of their own phonemic system as they were learning the Aryan language. All of this points to a good deal of intermingling between the Aryan and the non-Aryan peoples in North India (see also Southworth 1974).

It is obvious that Renou's assumption of the “secluded” existence of the Vedic Aryans can not be supported. I have dwelt upon these linguistic data because they constitute the strongest evidence undermining the assumptions of Indologists who are committed to the notion of the purity of the “Aryan/Vedic” tradition.12

The Later Vedic Period. Although there were continuities between the Early and the Later Vedic traditions, certain striking discontinuities are also apparent. These latter are often glossed over by scholars who focus on the Vedic period as a whole. The literary sources of the later Vedic period are still Sruti, or revealed scripture, but the content of the most important of these works, the Upaniṣads, is strikingly different from that of the Saṁhitās. The former are basically philosophical in nature, as opposed to the mainly ritual intent of the latter. Many new metaphysical concepts appear in these texts, including some that are the very foundation of stones of the later Hinduism. I would argue that the dramatic change in the thrust of the religious texts of the late Vedic period can be attributed in large measure to the more prominent role now being played by non-Aryan, especially Dravidians, in the formation of the Great Tradition. An Aryan-non-Aryan synthesis, cultural, linguistic, and racial, had been taking place, perhaps from the beginning of the Vedic period (see, e.g., Deshpande, 1979:297-298).

Before setting forth the more specific features of the argument I shall mention certain sociolinguistic matters. One of the leading sources of confusion in Indian studies is the general tendency to
assume that because a philosophical concept (or some other item of culture) carries a Sanskrit label it is therefore "Aryan" in origin. For example, *samsāra* is unquestionably a Sanskrit word, but what is signified by it—rebirth, or the wheel of existence—is apparently not Aryan in origin or part of the Indo-European religion that the Aryans brought with them to India. Indeed, many, though certainly not all, of the basic concepts that undergird the Indian philosophical systems—be they Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain—have no counterpart in the Indo-European religion as it has been reconstructed. Yet they all carry Sanskrit labels. The tendency to assume that these concepts are Aryan has contributed to the general dismissal of the non-Aryan, mainly Dravidian, role in the development of Hindu religion and philosophy.

How can we account for the wide use of Sanskrit terminology for many items of Indian culture that may not be Aryan in origin? The Aryans, not long after their arrival on the Indian scene, began to adopt many non-Aryan features as their own. Chatterji (1959) observed that such borrowings occurred not just in language, religion, and philosophy, but also in the areas of food and drink, dress, house types and furnishings, systems of computation, etc. As these were woven into the emerging cultural fabric many acquired Sanskrit labels. Such was particularly the case with religious-philosophical concepts, for Sanskrit was the accepted scholarly and sacred language of the authors of the Vedas. Eventually use of these concepts within an established body of sacred texts made them reference points of the religious philosophy of the society as a whole.

At this point we can turn to an examination of some important metaphysical concepts of the later Vedic period. It was in the Upaniṣads that these concepts first made their appearance in the literature (although in some cases a term employed in the Sāṁhitās became perpetuated over time but later referred to a much-modified version of the original concept that it designated.) However, it was only considerably later that any systematic philosophical systems emerged. My intention here is to discuss the most important of these concepts and to try to determine whether they are likely to have been non-Aryan in origin or at least heavily influenced by non-Aryan traditions, particularly the Dravidian. Again, it is important to ask oneself whether these concepts have counterparts in the early Indo-European culture as
it has been reconstructed. Unlike some scholars, I find it impossible to assume—given the linguistic evidence for non-Aryan influences and given the fact that the Aryans were relatively small communities within a largely non-Aryan environment—that these concepts evolved through some “internal logic” without any appreciable external influence. Such a pattern would run counter to what we know of cultural borrowing in a variety of historical social settings.

Especially important among those concepts that appeared in the later Vedic texts and which formed the basis for the post-Vedic Hindu philosophy are \textit{karma}, \textit{(Karman)}, \textit{saṁsāra}, \textit{mokṣa}, and \textit{Brahman} (with \textit{ātman}).

The doctrine of \textit{karma} is mentioned in several of the \textit{Upaniṣads} as a new teaching. At about the same time the classical societal system based on caste was in the process of emergence. From that time onward \textit{karma}, \textit{saṁsāra} (rebirth or reincarnation), \textit{nirvāna} (annihilation of the personal self), \textit{mokṣa} (release), and the caste system developed in a combination that was to become the central pillar of classical Indian culture.

It is true that there are problems of defining \textit{karma} and other metaphysical concepts. In the papers of a recent conference on \textit{karma} the observation was made that despite an “ultimately vain attempt to define what we meant by karma and rebirth . . . the unspoken conclusion was that we had a sufficient idea of the parameters of the topic to go ahead and study it” (O’Flaherty, 1980a:xi). Indeed, in a broader sense most abstract religious/philosophical concepts evoke disagreements over meaning (note the concept of the Trinity in Christianity). In addition, there is the difficulty of translating concepts from such a radically different cultural system as Hinduism into a meaningful Western idiom.

With these qualifications in hand, we can proceed with the discussion of these concepts. In its literal sense \textit{karma} means ‘action.’ In an ethical context, in the \textit{Upaniṣads} it refers to an action that is morally significant. In later times it came to mean the unseen energy believed to be generated by the performance of an action. This energy eventually discharges itself upon the actor, causing that person to experience the consequences of the original act. But since justice can not be worked out within the span of one life, rebirth is necessarily assumed.
According to Dandekar (1971:241),

As the result of his original ignorance, man gets involved in a whole cycle of existences which has been revolving since eternity (samsāra)—his doings in the course of one life inexorably governing the nature and conditions of his next life in a perpetual chain of causality (karma). His religio-philosophical summum bonum lies in mokṣa or his becoming free from this involvement through the realisation of his true nature, that is to say, of his essential identity with the one absolute reality.

Thus mokṣa becomes the highest religious goal in nearly all the later Vedic texts.

Although many scholars assume that these concepts are Aryan it is difficult to see in the earlier Indo-European or Indo-Iranian religion counterparts to this system, particularly the manner in which karma and samsāra articulate with mokṣa and with dharma, the impersonal principle that is the basis of order in both the natural and the social realms. Despite the attempts by some to find the seeds of karma in the early Vedic sacrificial rituals (Boon, 1983:186; cf. O’Flaherty, 1980b), the weight of the evidence points to a non-Aryan origin for the ideological complex karma-samsāra-mokṣa.

Turning now to the concept of Brahman, one late Rg Vedic hymn (the Hymn of Creation) speculates about an impersonal divine force that is the single cause of creation. Referred to as “It” or “That One,” it appears later in time as the Brahman of Vedanta philosophy and forms part of a very different matrix—one that is quite alien to the earlier Indo-European religion. The word brahman, as it appears in the Saṃhitās, means sacred utterance, (or the power generated thereby), but by the end of the Vedic period it had come to be applied to the idea of the “One” referred to in the Creation Hymn.

It is important to note that the Creation Hymn, concerned as it is with an abstract, impersonal divine force, stands out as clearly atypical. Most of the several thousand Vedic hymns were dedicated to a variety of deities, almost all of them male, who were partially personal conceptions of powers that are aspects of the natural world. The content of this hymn reflects the synthesis between the Aryan and non-Aryan cultures that had been proceeding over the centuries.

In the Upaniṣadic period Brahman came to be linked to the concept of ātman. In the Saṃhitās ātman had been the life-breath
that leaves the body at the moment of death and, in the case of humans, rises to heaven. In time the idea of heaven essentially disappeared and ātman came to be seen as ultimately identical with Brahman, as expressed in the Upaniṣadic formula tat tvam asī “That (Brahman) thou (the human soul) art.” As Zaehner (1966:viii) put it, “the basic doctrine of the Upanishads is the identification of Brahman with ātman, that is to say, of the changeless essence that upholds the universe . . . with the same changeless essence that indwells the human spirit.”

Renou (1953) sought to connect the later concept of Brahman with the earlier meaning of the word brahman, arguing that Brahman still connotes “the latent energy underlying the old enigmatic formulae” (p. 25). But this can only be a partial explanation of the development of the concept over time. (It must be remembered that Renou proceeded under the assumption that the Vedic religion developed within a cultural vacuum—see my earlier discussion.) He was not willing to entertain the possibility of extra-Aryan influences in Vedism.

The cultural matrix within which Brahman and ātman of later Vedanta philosophy appear includes the vital concept of māyā. In the Vedic hymns this word simply meant ‘craftiness’ or ‘deception.’ In the course of time it came to refer to the phenomenal universe which is deemed to be ultimately illusory. Here too, as was the case with Brahman and ātman, highly sophisticated conceptualizations had been developed out of the relatively simple concepts of the early Vedic texts. We need to ask ourselves whether the earlier Indo-European or Indo-Iranian religion really provides sufficient basis for the dramatic evolution in religious philosophy that occurred on Indian soil. Reluctant though many Indologists may be to acknowledge the non-Aryan element in the formation of Hinduism, it seems highly unrealistic not to. And it must be recalled that of the non-Aryan peoples the Dravidians have formed the largest and most culturally advanced component.

Other important concepts from the Upaniṣadic period, ones that stemmed mainly from non-Aryan influences, are yoga, samādhi, tapas, and ahimsā. The indications that are yoga (which emphasizes techniques of mind control for spiritual ends) and the ascetic tradition in general are very old in India. The archaeological remains of the Indus civilization, which reached its zenith at
least a thousand years before the composition of the Rg Veda, include an amulet or seal from Mohenjo-daro in which the figure is seated in the classic yogi posture (or āsana). It may be significant that the great fertility god of the post-Vedic period, Śiva, is frequently depicted in this position (though the posture is not exclusive to him) and is widely known as the Great Yogi. The concept of samādhi ‘concentration’ is the highest level of yogic meditation techniques. And tapas refers to the austerities typically associated with yoga and other practices of ascetics. Ahiṁsā, too, is part of this cultural complex, for it refers to a kind of austerity involving non-injury to living things, particularly human and animal life. The origins of asceticism, which underwent its greatest development in the post-Vedic period, do not seem to lie in the Aryan culture. The appearance of the aforementioned concepts in the Upaniṣadic period certainly points, along with other evidence, to a large-scale introduction of non-Aryan patterns into the Great Tradition during the Upaniṣadic period and a subsequent blending of Aryan and non-Aryan features into the medley we call Hinduism.

The Post-Vedic Period. The post-Vedic era saw the systematic development of the great philosophies of India. The Upaniṣadic concepts discussed above, as well as others, eventually became integrated into coherent philosophical systems, especially by Śaṅkara and Rāmanuja, and other important systems arose that drew partly on concepts from the Vedic texts and partly from those in non-Vedic traditions. Śaṅkhya and yoga, with their emphasis on puruṣa-prakṛti, stand out in this regard.

Herein I shall not attempt to discuss the philosophical systems as they developed in Classical Hinduism. That is well beyond the scope or purpose of this essay. However, I will discuss briefly some of the major concepts and related practices that emerged, particularly as described in the “popular scriptures” (Sruti), such as the Epics, including the Bhagavadgītā and the Purāṇas, which now came to dominate the literary scene. These are to be distinguished from the revealed scriptures (Sruti), which constitute the Vedic body of literature. The popular scriptures, like the revealed scriptures, belong to the Great Tradition—though many features in them originally grew out of the Little Tradition.

Before proceeding, however, it is important to comment upon the heterodox philosophies, Jainism and Buddhism, which ap-
The early Upanishads appeared at the beginning of the post-Vedic period. Both systems incorporated many concepts from the Upaniṣads, though they interpreted them in somewhat different ways. However, because of their rejection of the Brahman priesthood and of the Vedas as the ultimate authority they were thereby labeled as unorthodox. Jainism and Buddhism also drew upon the non-Aryan, mainly Dravidian, tradition. Zimmer (1951:218-219) observed that the history of Indian philosophy has been characterized largely by a series of crises of interaction between the invasive Vedic-Aryan and the non-Aryan, earlier, Dravidian styles of thought and spiritual experience. The Brahmans were the principal representatives of the former, while the latter was preserved, and finally reasserted, by the surviving princely houses of the native Indian, dark-skinned, pre-Aryan population. 

Indeed, Zimmer (p. 228) contended that the analysis of the psyche that prevailed in the synthesis of the “Six Systems” of classical Indian philosophy was prefigured in the Jaina view and introduced via Śāṅkhyā and yoga. It was, he argued, originally a non-Aryan contribution.

The system of Tantra, which emerged in the medieval period in India, perpetuated many of the ideas of Śāṅkhyā, particularly, and refined the application of the psychological principles alluded to above. Zimmer (1951:219) saw these as affecting the whole texture of the religious life of India as well as much of the popular and esoteric Buddhist teaching in Tibet and East Asia.

The Śāṅkhyā philosophy assumes two ultimate absolutes: puruṣa (Śiva on the more popular plane), which is the masculine principle that symbolizes Spirit, and prakṛti (Śakti), the feminine principle that represents Matter. On one level these complementary opposites find their counterpart in the Brahman-Māyā dichotomy of Advaita Vedanta. In the latter system, however, only Brahman is ultimately real, Māyā fundamentally being illusion.

As we turn now to a brief discussion of the great Hindu god Śiva and the leading goddess idea, Śakti, from the perspective of their
worship on the popular level of the Great Tradition, we must take note of the recent controversy over the origins of Śiva. It has long been assumed that Śiva, whose worship in the post-Vedic period has been associated mainly with Dravidian India, was non-Aryan in origin. Certainly Śiva is not prefigured in what we know of Indo-European or Indo-Iranian religion. Moreover, the Vedic deity Rudra, who displayed many features in common with Śiva of the later period, has been thought by most scholars to represent a blend of Aryan and non-Aryan ideas. But Srinivasan (1983), in her survey article, “Vedic Rudra-Śiva,” challenged these assumptions. However, in the process she evinced certain assumptions of her own that seem dubious at best. One is the belief that because Rudra seems to her to be clearly Vedic, and by implication Aryan, Śiva, the deity with whom Rudra became identified in the later Vedic texts, is therefore also Vedic and Aryan. Certainly, the fact that Śiva is mentioned in these texts does not necessarily make him Vedic or Aryan. As we have already seen, dramatic changes occurred in the later Vedic period with the influx of increasingly more non-Aryan features. Also, the author seems unwilling to consider the possibility that the reason Rudra evolved from a relatively minor deity in the early period to a position of prominence in the Śvetāsvatara Upaniṣad might have been because of his growing identification with the great Dravidian god Śiva. Here again we see (as with Renou) the tendency to assume that the Vedic religion developed within a cultural vacuum, which is patently unrealistic. (For one thing, it fails to take account of the linguistic findings pointing to Dravidian influences as early as the period of the Rg Veda.) This kind of reasoning also permits the easy identification of Vedic with Aryan (though of course not all Aryan cultural traits were Vedic), and the failure to recognize that by the later Vedic period what is labeled as Aryan had already been diluted to a significant degree by borrowings from the non-Aryan culture.

This leads us to a discussion of Śakti, the generic name for the Great Goddess and her various manifestations. Śiva and Śakti are indissolubly linked, and Śakti is unarguably non-Aryan. (This is something that Srinivasan (1983) failed to take account of in her attempt to categorize Śakti’s consort Śiva as Vedic, and by implication Aryan.) Husband and wife in the Great Tradition, Śiva and

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Śakti are even more closely connected as polar, and complementary, opposites in Sāṇkhya philosophy and Sāṇkhya-based Tantrism.

The word śakti literally means ‘power’ or ‘energy,’ particularly the creative power or energy of the cosmos. It is a word of feminine gender in Sanskrit, and the concept is given concrete expression in the form of the Goddess. Within the Great Tradition followers of Śakti form the third largest sect of Hinduism, after devotees of Viṣṇu and Śiva. But even among Hindus who give primacy to one of these male deities the belief is widespread that these and other male deivinities are static and passive; they are powerless to act in the realm of matter and thus must draw upon the dynamic energy (śakti) of their spouses (Wadley, 1980). Human beings are also thought to possess śakti, but females have it in much greater abundance than males. Although the notion of śakti is widespread in Hinduism, the fact that the concept is most highly developed in Tamilnad, and was given considerable emphasis in the Tamil literature dating back almost two thousand years, leads one to the view that the concept of śakti is mainly a Dravidian development.

Gross (1978:279) made the point that in classical and modern Hinduism every manifestation of divinity, ranging from minor spirits to the Great Gods, has a female as well as a male manifestation. For example, there are icons of goddesses with all the major attributes of Viṣṇu and Śiva; indeed the entire Trimūrti occasionally assumes female form. And rather late in the Vedic tradition the remnants of the old Vedic gods were assigned female counterparts. This certainly bespeaks a strong indigenous, mainly Dravidian, impact on the iconography of India, possibly dating back to the later Vedic period.

Sen (1983) is an exemplar of the popular approach among Indologists that seeks to ascribe a Vedic (and by implication an Aryan) origin to many prominent features of Hinduism, including goddess worship. Although he conceded, in his survey work on the Great Goddess in Indic tradition, that no clear picture of her emerged before the period of the Purāṇas, he nevertheless confidently asserted that

from the early and late Vedic texts we gather a group of female deities that later supplied the material with which the idea and image of the great mother goddess was built up in India (p. 25).
Today goddess worship in Hinduism is most prominent in Dravidian India and in certain areas with a strong Dravidian substratum—e.g., Bengal. Aspects of it can apparently be traced to the pre-Aryan Indus civilization, which involved, among other features, worship of the female principle. The archaeological remains include a series of “ringstones” representing the yoni, the female counterpart of the phallic emblem, the linga, which also has been found at Indus Valley sites. At the same time or earlier in the ancient Near Eastern and pre-Classical Mediterranean cultures worship of the female principle both as a maternal creative force and as an erotic and potentially destructive energy was a prominent feature of the religious systems of these areas. The ancestors of the Dravidians, who seem to have come from somewhere in the aforementioned general region, very likely brought goddess worship to India with them a millennium or two before the Aryan entry into India.

The Mother Goddess idea was of only minor importance in the Indo-European religion. Although the Classical Greek deities included many prominent female figures, these evidently were inherited from pre-Classical Mediterranean civilizations and the Old European culture (not to be confused with the Indo-European) (Gimbutas, 1982).

We referred to the fact that in India women are assumed to possess great amounts of sakti. A number of other Hindu customs centering about women also seem to be basically non-Aryan. Hart (1973) has discussed these in detail, pointing to their prominence in ancient Tamil culture. He believes that a woman’s chastity was far less important in the Vedic period in North India than it was later. It seems likely that the ancient Tamil concept of the sacred power of the chaste woman was the source of these new patterns in post-Vedic North India. Certainly there was no precedent for them in the Aryan culture of the Vedic period.

In the post-Vedic period new customs in North India such as the taboo on widow remarriage, ritual restrictions on widows, and the taboo on a wife’s uttering her husband’s given name began to appear. But most of these patterns had been mentioned in Tamil poetry several centuries earlier. For instance, the North Indian work Skandapurāṇa listed virtually every vow expected of a widow that was mentioned in the Tamil poems of at least six centuries earlier: “tonsure, eating small amounts, not sleeping on a cot, and...
offering *pîntam* to the dead husband" (Hart, 1973:249). It is likely also that widow burning, or *sati*, is non-Aryan. Hart argues that it is only in early Tamil literature that the real reasons for *sati* and widow asceticism are stated: i.e., the widow is filled with sacred forces that might endanger herself and others unless they are suppressed (p. 250). He also assumes that beginning in about the third century B.C.E. an influx of Dravidian elements into Aryan culture took place. This was a period when great numbers of Dravidian words entered Sanskrit and the spoken Indo-Aryan languages of the time, along with many poetic techniques and conventions from the oral literature of the Tamils and the Dravidians of the Deccan area (p. 250).

Because of the matrilineal patterns that survived among the Dravidian Nayars of South India until quite recently and because of the emphasis given in the Dravidian kinship system to relatives on the mother’s side, we can probably assume that this system was at one time matrilineally oriented. This may possibly tie in with the emphasis given to female deities among the Dravidians and the idea, most highly developed in the Dravidian subculture, that women possess an abundance of Śakti.

Earlier we indicated that the major concepts and related practices that emerged in post-Vedic Hinduism find their literary expression in popular scriptures such as the Epics (including the *Bhagavadgītā*), the Purāṇas, the *Yoga Sūtras*, and eventually the Tantras and the emerging *bhakti* literature in the vernacular languages. Although some Indo-European (i.e., Aryan) elements appear within these post-Vedic works—most notably, the figure of Rāma, the ideal Aryan chieftain—the non-Indo-European component is striking. According to Dandekar (1974:48-49) Viṣṇu was a pre-Aryan fertility god before he was vitally transformed by the Vedic poet-priests into an “Aryan” deity. Certainly his dark-skinned incarnation Kṛṣṇa incorporates important non-Aryan values. A number of other incarnations of Viṣṇu, which take animal or half-human, half-animal form, lack counterparts in the Indo-European tradition (except among the Greeks, who inherited much from pre-Indo-European civilizations). Śiva (the Great Yogi) is mainly Dravidian, as are his consort Śakti, who manifests herself in many shapes and forms, and their sons Kārttikeya, modeled after the prominent Dravidian warrior god Murugan, and the elephant-headed deity Gaṇeśa, who is so
popular in India today. Other patterns without clear Indo-European parallels include the reverence shown to certain animals, particularly snakes, and to some extent monkeys, as well as a variety of trees and other plants such as the tulasī. Though widespread in India, these practices are especially prominent in the South, the area of the heaviest Dravidian concentration in recent times.

Certain salient features of the Hindu worship—pilgrimages, the temple complex, other patterns associated with the temple, such as the dance and the role of devadāsīs, the vital place of images of the deities, and pūjā, the symbolic sacrifice in which fruits, flowers, powders, incense, etc., are offered—are non-Aryan. Of course, Sanskrit remains the preferred language of the rituals, and the Vedic deity Agni is always present in attenuated form; thus certain Aryan features have been preserved. But overwhelmingly the patterns associated with religious practice are non-Aryan and probably mainly Dravidian in origin.

Before concluding this section on post-Vedic Hinduism, I shall draw attention to three areas of Indian culture whose significant Dravidian component has often been neglected in the literature—viz., bhakti, caste, and the martial arts. These patterns serve to reinforce my contentions concerning the vital role of the Dravidian heritage in Indian civilization.

Bhakti mainly involves worship of a personal deity who has assumed the form of a particular god or goddess, especially Viṣṇu and Śiva, or, in some regions of India, Śatki. Through fervent devotion to that deity the worshipper eventually obtains mokṣa (release from the cycle of rebirths).

This new religion of devotional theism is thought to have had its beginnings in North India at least by the third or second centuries B.C.E. But in its final form it combines influences from both North and South, and possibly also elements introduced by invaders from the Middle East. It is often not recognized that the South Indian (i.e., Dravidian) component was the crucial one in the formation of bhakti as we know it today. Zaehner (1966:134), for example, observed that

it was the Bhagavad-Gītā that set in motion the transformation of Hinduism from a mystical technique based on the ascetic virtues of renunciation and self-forgetfulness into the impassioned religion of self-abandonment to God, but the strictly religious impulse which gave
momentum to the whole bhakti movement stemmed from the Tamil lands of south India. From the tenth century on all that is most vital in Hinduism manifests itself in the form of bhakti. [On this matter see also Basham, 1968:332.]

Furthermore, the highly elaborate philosophy of Śaiva Siddhānta, an intellectual analysis of the mystical experiences of the bhakta, or devotee, is distinctly and thoroughly Dravidian (Neill, 1974:62-63).

On the matter of caste, the varṇas ‘classes’ or ‘orders’ are undoubtedly Aryan, but the system of hereditary castes and occupations called jātis is much more Dravidian than Aryan. We could also say that whereas the Aryan varṇas continued as the theoretical basis of classical Indian society, the non-Aryan jātis made up its core and eventually came to dominate in later Hinduism.

Specifically, the moderate social differences of the early Vedic period became intensified as the sūdras were added to the original Aryan three-class order as a fourth level. The sūdras were menials, and in the post-Vedic period this group apparently was expanded to include the great majority of Dravidians and some other non-Aryans. There is strong evidence to indicate that at least some pre-Aryan peoples, and particularly the early Dravidians, already had a system of jātis before the Aryanization of their cultures. In the course of time the varṇa system underwent modification, and the varṇa and jāti orders became interwoven into the highly elaborate ranking system of recent times.

Hart (1975) has presented evidence for an emphasis on social differences, on wide gaps between certain sectors of the population among the early Tamils. The purity-pollution polarity, which is intimately bound up with caste, is certainly Dravidian. On the whole, the Dravidians have preserved the most extreme patterns of social distance among different caste groupings to be found in India today.

Some mention might be made of the “martial arts” in India. The “martial arts” (not to be confused with techniques of warfare) have been concerned with “the art of the practice” and have traditionally been closely connected with spiritual disciplines and medical arts. They are an Asian development that arose first either in India or in China, or perhaps along the trade routes between the two regions around two thousand years ago.
Some passages in the Indian epics point to the existence of "martial arts" in North India, as does also the *Agni Purānam* (Dutt, 1967:894-900). Here the art of archery involved, among other practices, obeisance to masters, homage paid to the weapons, medicinal lore, religious rites (some of them Tantric in nature—e.g., the worship of phallic emblems), and "one-pointedness" and other features of meditation based on yoga. Such a constellation of features seems to be basically non-Aryan. Today the "martial arts" survive in only a few places in North India—in Manipur (in the extreme northeast), in Bengal, and in Rajasthan—whereas they are still flourishing in many villages in the Dravidian region, where they are deeply embedded in the social and religious life of ruralites.

In many parts of central and northern Kerala (in South India) various local communities maintain their own *kalaris* (gymnasiums or training grounds), which typically include a temple of a guardian deity, often a form of the goddess Bhagavati or a combination of Śiva and Śakti. In the *kalarî* "martial arts" styles called *kalarippayattu* are practiced by young boys (and sometimes girls). Earlier systems, particularly *āṭitaṭa* (found also in Tamilnad), underlie these forms. Also part of the picture is physical and spiritual training based on yogic principles under masters who are versed in traditional medicine and the secret art of *marma adi* (the striking of vital points) (see especially Zarrilli, n.d.; also Reid & Croucher, 1963: chap. 3, and Rao, 1957:25, 173). Interestingly, among the outgrowths of *kalarippayattu* are Kathakaḷī and other dance dramas of Kerala.

**The Little Tradition**

Limitations of space force me to refer only briefly to this topic. The Great Tradition certainly has drawn upon the Little Tradition and in turn the Little Tradition has been informed by the Great Tradition (see, e.g., Kurup, 1977; Whitehead, 1921:141-142). But tracing this pattern of acculturation over time is well nigh impossible, given the fact that whereas the literary records tell us much about the Great Tradition, they make only relatively brief mention of the Little Tradition. Aspects of the latter have been recorded in detail only recently through field observation,
especially over the past half-century or so. However, even given these limitations on our knowledge, some general patterns can be discerned.

The Little Tradition appears as an underlying stratum throughout Indian culture. At the same time it displays local and regional variations. In a general sense we can speak of contrasts between the Little Tradition in South (or Dravidian) India and that in North (or “Aryan”) India—always keeping in mind that regions such as Bengal or Maharashtra, which are usually counted as “Aryan,” display many non-Aryan features. This is the case even on the level of the Great Tradition, which in general show less regional variation than the Little Tradition.

Briefly, what are some prominent features of the Little Tradition? The most salient pattern is the plethora of female deities, including many “Disease-Mothers” (Babb, 1975; Whitehead, 1921; Kurup, 1977). It is said that every village has its tutelary goddess, along with a variety of other deities, male and female, with the male deities usually being subordinate to the female. Thus in the Little Tradition the Goddess is more ascendant than her male consort, whereas in the Great Tradition the situation is reversed. In the region of Central India and nearby areas that Babb (1975:226) studied, “a shrine or temple housing a goddess is an apparently indispensable part of the village scene.” And unlike the great gods and goddesses, the local divinities are not considered to be remote figures; they easily enter into ordinary human affairs.

Cattle rituals and animal sacrifice have long been widespread in South Indian villages; even a kind of bullfighting mentioned two thousand years ago in early Tamil poems still survives in southernmost India.

Veneration for snakes is prominent in both the Little and the Great Traditions, particularly in the Dravidian area and Bengal (e.g., Kurup, 1977; Elmore, 1984; Neff, 1987). Serpents or nāgas, many of which are depicted as female in Hindu art forms, are believed to bestow prosperity, fertility, and healing. Thus many traditional South Indians today keep snakes in their gardens and regularly feed them.

We have indicated that the Little Tradition, particularly in the Dravidian area, preserves certain very ancient patterns in India
such as goddess worship, cattle rituals and snake worship. Significantly, these were also prominent features of the ancient pre-classical circum-Mediterranean and Near Eastern religious practice. As noted earlier, this is the general geographic region from which certain Dravidian cultural traits are thought to have sprung and the area from which many of the ancestors of the Dravidians are assumed to have spread.

To conclude this brief section on the Little Tradition, there is also worship of many minor divinities of localized folk origin such as yakṣas, yakṣīs, and apsaras. The last two are female figures associated with animals, trees, and sacred rivers. According to Michell (1977:33), “the oldest monumental sacred sculptures that have been preserved, such as those from central India dating back to the second and third centuries B.C., do not represent the principal gods and goddesses of Hinduism but these folk spirits.”

**Concluding Remarks**

One of the great stumbling blocks to achieving an understanding of the origin and development of Indian civilization has been the strong pro-Aryan bias on the part of Western Indologists. Mainly this bias has stemmed from the fact that the Aryan component in Indian culture has been seen as an extension of the European cultural heritage, which has been presumed to be superior. Many Indologists have then proceeded on the assumption that the Vedic and post-Vedic cultures in North India were overwhelmingly Aryan. Case (1985:114) has posited the existence of a “Brahmanical, textual” bias of Europeans (particularly British colonialists) toward Indian culture that “may have helped to create the Brahmanical tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in a form that had not previously existed.” It may not be out of place to suggest here that a major imperative for Western scholars, including those specializing in South Asia, is a re-evaluation of the role of minority peoples, who in a sense fall into Wolf’s (1982) category of “people without history.”

I emphasized early on that the beginnings of a re-evaluation of the role of the Dravidians and their culture have recently been discernible; even Basham was led to revise his earlier assessment of this cultural entity. My own views conform most closely to those of Tyler. Still, I have proceeded in ways that he and others
apparently have not. For example, I have assumed from the outset that we must first set the Indian culture within a broader historical context—one that transcends the boundaries of the South Asian region. With this in mind I have asked myself the question: “Why do so many allegedly Aryan cultural traits in India apparently lack counterparts in areas of Indo-European settlement outside of India?” The answer very likely is that many of these features were either part of the pre-Aryan heritage or else were the products of an Aryan-non-Aryan synthesis.

I have also attempted to deal with the question of which pre-Aryan peoples exerted the greatest amount of influence upon the Aryans in South Asia. I have argued, through the logic of eliminating alternative explanations, that, based upon the data available to us (mainly linguistic but also to some extent cultural and archaeological), the Dravidians are those who most clearly left their mark upon the Aryans, even in the early Vedic period. It is significant that few observers of Indian history have given due recognition to the linguistic data, relying almost entirely upon cultural, archaeological, and to some extent racial findings. Yet the linguistic record is in many ways the most crucial; certainly it constitutes the firmest evidence that we have on the Aryan-Dravidian confrontation.

The assumption has been strong, on the part of both Indians and Westerners, that because the Aryans culturally conquered the indigenous peoples in the subcontinent they therefore were the primary shapers of the course of Indian civilization. But the broad spectrum of the data would seem to indicate otherwise. The Aryans were essentially cut off from their Indo-European relatives, and as they moved ever more deeply into the cul-de-sac of the Indian subcontinent they were to a high degree absorbed linguistically, culturally, and racially by the indigenous, primarily Dravidian, peoples and cultures. Certain Aryan features survived—most notably the role of Sanskrit as the primary vehicle in the creation and transmission of the sacred literature. But what stands out in India is the enormous amount of syncretism that has occurred in language, culture, and physical type.

Herein I have argued that the historical facts concerning the origin and development of Indian civilization belie the traditional image that most Indologists have had of the Dravidians. As with most minorities, the Dravidians have either been generally ignored or else imbued with a distorted image. If my assessment is
correct, a considerable re-evaluation of the course of development of one of the world’s great civilizations is in order.

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NOTES


2. For example, Basham remarks that “the wild fertility cults of the early Tamils involved orgiastic dancing, and their earliest literature shows that prostitution was common among them; thus religious prostitution came naturally to the Dravidians” (p. 187). (Italics supplied.)

3. Kuiper (1967:94-96) indicates that the Munda languages have since the prehistoric period tended to adapt to Dravidian linguistic patterns.

4. The three kingdoms into which the Tamil country has traditionally been divided—the Cōla, the Cēra, and the Pāṇḍya—were mentioned by the grammarian Katyāyana (fourth century B.C.E.) and in the inscriptions of Asoka, whose forces invaded South India in the third century B.C.E.

5. From the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* (first century C.E.), Ptolemy’s *Geography* (second century), and early Tamil poems and the Tamil epic, *Silappadikāram* (probably the third century), we learn many details of the flourishing ports of the Tamil country and their significant trade with Roman Egypt.

6. In a more recent book Hock (1986) seems to modify his stance somewhat, downplaying the Mundas and emphasizing the Dravidians a bit more.

If it were the case that the Mundas were at one time a significant linguistic entity, then why are so very few Munda loanwords to be found in Dravidian? This question has apparently not been considered by scholars of Hock’s persuasion.

For a discussion of the linguistic data supporting the thesis that the major external force acting upon the Indo-Aryan grammatical structure has been the presence of the Dravidian languages, see Sjoberg, forthcoming 1991; Sjoberg, forthcoming.

7. Significantly, two important words for ‘city’—nagara and pattana—were incorporated into Sanskrit, evidently from Dravidian (Southworth, 1979:208). It strains the imagination to believe that the Aryans would have borrowed such terms from a people of simpler culture than their own.

8. This should not be taken to imply that the Dravidians or their culture are necessarily connected with Australia. It is true, however, that an important racial component among the Dravidians is the proto-Australoid, a category that has connections with early populations of Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, Australia, and Oceania.
9. This is part of a conceptual framework developed by Robert Redfield, who, according to Leslie (1968:352),

conceived of civilizations in cultural terms as systems of coexisting and interdependent “Great and Little Traditions,” the former being part of the idea systems—the science, philosophy, and fine arts—of the critical and reflective elite and the latter being part of the folk arts, lore, and religion of the common people.

In this paper I extend the concept of the Great Tradition to include those beliefs and practices that constitute the mainstream Hinduisms of today and generally find expression in the body of mainstream religious texts. Over several millennia elements of the Little Tradition have been gradually absorbed into the Great Tradition. Thus, in the past the makeup of the Great Tradition varied during different time periods.

10. The Great Tradition in India should not be confused with the so-called “Aryan” tradition. Scholars such as Clothey (1978:45) speak of the “Aryan” or “Northern” tradition as if they were coterminous with the Great Tradition. I do not follow this practice. When I employ this concept (except when discussing the Vedic period) I assume an amalgam of features that on the whole may be more non-Aryan than Aryan. Elmore (1984), writing in 1913, used the term “Brahmanic” for the Great Tradition. At times he even equated “Hinduism” with the Great Tradition and thus saw a contrast between “Hindu” and “Dravidian” (e.g., pp. 151-152).

What he was really comparing was the Great and Little Traditions in India.

11. There were earlier attempts to identify borrowings from Dravidian into Sanskrit, most notably by Bloch (1965). For a discussion of the early work, see Emeneau (1954:285-286).

12. Even as late as the 1980s we see the failure of certain influential Indologists to take account of the linguistic and broader cultural evidence, e.g., Srinivasan, 1983.

13. Other recent works on Siva, mainly by art historians, apparently assume this deity to be basically Aryan. Clearly they do not adequately recognize the non-Aryan (or Dravidian) factor (e.g., Kramrisch, 1981a, 1981b).

14. Many references to śakti, with the specific meaning of the sacred power of a chaste woman, appeared in North India beginning in the period of the Epics and the Purāṇas.

15. The cult of the Great Goddess underwent dramatic development in Mahāyāna Buddhism, especially in the Tantric sects. In turn this had an impact on Hinduism. These patterns occurred mainly in Bengal and other parts of northeastern India, as well as in areas influenced by the latter, Tibet in particular. Farther to the south in India, worship of the “Mother of the Buddhas” and other female symbolism arose in some prominent Mahāyāna sects centered in Andhra Pradesh (Paul, 1980:913, 138). Jainism, too, was affected by Hindu Mother Goddess cults.

16. I am grateful to Phillip Zarrilli for calling my attention to this source and for his general assistance in clarifying the nature and distribution of kalarippayattu. He is not responsible for the conclusions I have drawn from the data on the “martial arts.”
To cite one instance, certain features of the typical religious observances of women in the Great Tradition, as opposed to the practices of men—e.g., the popularity among women of the veneration of Gaṇeśa—seem to have their source in the Little Tradition.

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