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Sjoberg, Andree, *Dravidian Language and Culture: Dravidian University, Kuppam 2009*

When we discuss contemporary Dravidian peoples we are generally referring to over 200 million people, from diverse groups across the India sub-continent area, who speak languages belonging to the Dravidian language family and who very often are characterized by darker skin color than that of first language Hindi speakers. The term Dravidian comes from the Sanskrit term Dravidian, meaning “Tamil.” Therefore, what is often depicted as “Dravidian” reflects a variety of customs popularly seen as “South Indian”, though the presence of Dravidian speakers extends into central India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The origin of the Dravidians has been a subject of much controversy. And a great deal of that has been focused on the relative extent to which the Dravidians have been a major primary creator of the larger Hindu civilization of the Indian sub-continent or the recipients of outside enrichments to which they have added the residuals of their more ancient ways.

A fundamental premise of this book—a collection of diverse essays by Prof. Andree Sjoberg, a long-time active member of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, is that there is a significant under-appreciation of the contribution of Dravidians to present day more generalized Indian Hindu culture; further, key elements of Hindu culture are often excessively attributed to the Aryan groups who entered India, pushing back the more ancient Dravidian populations in the process.

But while Sjoberg makes a strong case that the preponderance of evidence seems to attest to the major formative role of Dravidian speakers in the molding of Hindu civilization, many of the specifics remain imprecise, as she herself clearly notes. For example, she notes that the linguistic and biological evidence often seems contradictory, because many of the specifics of linguistics point to an origin in Central Asia and Asia Minor for Dravidian groups while other biological and cultural aspects seem more oriented to the southeast and even a Proto-Australoid or Australoid past. This publication by Pravadea University provides an excellent exposure to how Dr. Sjoberg’s own thoughts and research are important contributions to the resolution of many of those contradictions.

Pravadea University’s publishing of Sjoberg's work, *Dravidian Language Culture*, represents a type of activity frequently produced by specific institutions and organizations of a highly localized nature and whose subject matter is often perceived to be esoteric or highly specialized in contrast to the interests and presentations of reigning

majority concerns, conceptions and dynamics. In India, of course, the concept of “minority” must be understood as only relative, given the size of minority populations and the richness of local cultures. Yet those outside the obvious intended audience for such works who do take up the challenge of navigating through the concentrated localized content are often rewarded with profound insight - like sweet grapes picked through the labor of arduous workers who select from rarer and more mature vines than those used for more general mass distribution. Such is the case with Sjoberg’s book.

Sjoberg uses what she identifies as the process of “elimination” to support her thesis that Dravidian culture has profoundly influenced what is characterized as present-day Hindu Indian civilization. However, because the evidence is so very scattered and varied, she makes the case that such a large presence of evidence, even if imprecise, justifies attribution of cause specifically because there is far less evidence to support a contrary position. In short, in cases where there is a lack of solid evidence, accepting the preponderance of evidence is the acceptable default criterion.

From a religious perspective, she notes how the core concept of Shakti (power or energy), so central to Hinduism, is clearly pre-Aryan and mainly Dravidian. Culturally, she notes the strong case for seeing the great India epics -- the Ramayana and the Mahabharata -- as having dominating Dravidian origins. Linguistically, she observes the strong influence of Dravidian on non-Dravidian languages such as Marathi.

Materially (128), she notes the evidence of large Dravidian urban settlement prior to the coming of the Aryans.

These are just small samples of the myriad of examples she provides and analyzes. In fact she offers so many that one begins to wonder why she feels that there is even a burden of proof being imposed on those arguing for the recognition of the massive Dravidian contribution to larger Indian Hindu civilization. Ironically, this is the question that Dr. Sjoberg does not address and therefore leaves the unacquainted reader not fully aware of its import. Why, if the preponderance of the evidence through a process of elimination is fairly clearly on the side of demonstrating the importance of the Dravidian language and culture to greater Indo-Hindu civilization, does she and others she collaborates with have to bear the burden of so demonstrating? Why is it not those who claim otherwise that have that burden?

Sjoberg addresses where the Dravidian peoples and language came from but not the origins of that debate itself. Yet it is this question that may be of most interest to an audience concerned with issues of the rise and evolution of human civilizations *per se*. The fact is that the debate itself comes directly from that combination of racism, conquest and colonialism that, in discovering the incredible depth, profundity and creativity of the world east of the Ganges, found it logical to ascribe Indo-Hindu magnificence to the influence of “Caucasian Aryan” people - and found allies in so

doing among the descendants of the population with self-ascribed ties to previous Persian mogul invaders.

A fascinating example of how this Dravidian–Aryan influence debate has served this purpose can be found in a very unlikely place: a speech that was given by President Leopold Sedar Senghor, first President of Senegal, a member of the Académie Française and a renowned poet, in 1974 at the International Institute of Tamil Studies.

Noting that Southern India is in the same latitude as Senegal, that the Indian sub-continent was formerly attached to East Africa, that Tamil legends refer to the existence of once flourishing cities now buried under the sea, Senghor in promoting an alternative Afro-Dravidian connection added supporting references from assorted other sources, including Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Leo Frobenius, D. Westermann and A. Sathasivam.

Senghor noted that “in Wolof (the predominant native language of Senegal) ‘xanjar’ means bronze; and in Telugu “xancara,” work in bronze; in Bambara “numu,” forge, and in Telugu “inumu,” iron; in Wolof “kamara,” name given to the blacksmith’s caste, and in Telugu “kamara,” name given to the blacksmith’s caste... the Wolof use of the eec, producing yarn from raw cotton, ...compared with the Pengo verb ec, meaning “to card cotton,” the Wolof word “konko,” a curved hoe, is exactly the same as the Naiki word “konki,” a curved hoe, the Wolof “kuti,” a pup with the Tamil word “kutti,” a pup, ... Wolof “xar,” sheep, and in Barahui “xar,” a ram; (and) in Wolof “nag,” cow, in Sere “naak,” in Poular “nagge” and in Tamil “naaku,” a female buffalo.

Senghor, who was not a linguist, wasn’t trying to take sides in the Aryan – Dravidian debate from a Hindu perspective. Rather, for him the debate itself was one of “racism” and the failure to recognize the contribution of the darker skinned people of the world to the dynamic of ever evolving civilizations around the world.

Moreover, he felt that the attempt of all reigning hegemonic groups to impose a belief in their predominance as the source of high civilization was antithetical to a true understanding that, in his words:

... it is miscegenation which has led to the development of civilizations that history has known, whether Egypt, Sumer or India. A civilization with no admixture is a cultural ghetto. ...And this is the ideal of every great civilization. ...It is the ideals of Pan-Human Civilization which is being hammered out ...with the participation of all nations.

As is inherent in most academic research, the researcher must tailor his or her contribution to the frame of the institutions and peer group with whom he or she is most directly engaged. This is the case with Dr. Sjoberg’s work and the result therefore is a

precise and sharp focus on particular issues and evidence rather than grand theory or expansive speculation. Inevitably the price paid, however, is a presentation that will directly only engage a limited audience.

But this should not be seen in any way as a diminution of the value of Dr. Sjoberg's work. To the contrary, her efforts provide the substance on which credible theory rises or falls. Her essays are each highly honed discussions. Most importantly, each is not only a scholar's contribution to the specific area of concern over Dravidian influences on Hinduism but also a needed nail in the coffin of epistemologies built on the conscious or unconscious exclusion of others and a denial of the process of civilization as a manifestation of a myriad of sources in a dynamic swirl of mutual transformations.

Sjoberg deserve thanks and appreciation for this book distilled from her toils among the rarer settings of scholarship in comparative civilization and in pursuit of the expansion of our understanding of how human civilizations, and their manifestation in particular forms and places, are the products of a myriad of influences, often from underappreciated peoples – in this case the Dravidian-speaking people of the Indian sub-continent.

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