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### Book Review: Michel Danino. *The Lost River: On the Trail of the Sarasvati*

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## Book Reviews

**Michel Danino. *The Lost River: On the Trail of the Sarasvati*.  
Gurgaon: Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd, 2010. 357 pages**

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When early civilizations were listed back at the beginning of the modern discipline that constitutes the comparative study of civilizations, one of the greatest of them all was yet essentially unknown. It was only about a century ago that information was brought forward on the possible existence of this most interesting, extensive, and influential Bronze Age civilization, the Indus River Valley Civilization.

And even then, as its former existence became known, British imperialism and Euro-centric thinking colored scholarly and popular perception: this newly-unearthed ancient civilization was truly not an actual independent civilization at all but rather the prehistoric precursor of an Aryan society which gave us the real first Indian civilization!

One such writer, for example, was Arnold Toynbee. He refers to “recent unearthing, in the Indus Valley, of a culture (dating, on the two sites first explored, from circa 3250 to circa 2750 B.C.) which was very closely related to that of the Sumerians in Iraq.” He thought it a part of the Empire of Sumer and Akkadia. Otherwise, “Indic” civilizational history apparently begins for Toynbee with the arrival of the barbarian Aryans (there was a “time of growth” which left its record in the Vedas, he says) and then the Guptas.

Equally, the great British Indologist A. L. Basham, who authored *The Wonder That Was India*, which I read in college, discounted the ancient civilization.

He does state, early in his work, that civilization, “in the sense of an organized system of government over a comparatively large area, developed nearly simultaneously in the river valleys of the Nile, Euphrates and Indus.” He points out, however, that we know a great deal about the civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, but we cannot read the inscriptions of the ancients in the Indus River Valley. Therefore, “our knowledge of the Indus civilization is inadequate in many respects, and it must be classed as prehistoric, for it has no history in the strict sense of the term.” But, worse, he comments:

The period of the Vedas, Brahmanas and Upanishads is a sort of transition from prehistory to history. If history, as distinct from archaeology, is the study of the human past from written sources, then India's history begins with the Aryans."

Basham goes on to observe that the "discovery of the Indus cities, which have nothing in common with the culture described in the Veda and are evidently pre-Vedic, proves that the hymns cannot have been composed before the end of Harappa."

So, "although the Aryans were not uninfluenced by the earlier inhabitants" and were "less advanced than that (culture) depicted in the *Iliad*," they basically subjugated the indigenous inhabitants, the Dasas, and moved on to greatness.

Could it be that the prejudices of the past regarding this early civilization were wrong? Today, this recently-discovered ancient civilization is typically known as the Indus or Harappan or Mohenjo Daro civilization. However, according to one investigator, Jane McIntosh, the "Saraswati river system may have been even more productive than that of the Indus, judging by the density of settlement along its course. ... While there are some fifty sites known along the Indus, the Saraswati has almost a thousand." Perhaps, as author Michel Danino explains in his fascinating work, *The Lost River: On the Trail of the Saraswati*, this civilization should be known more accurately as the "Indus-Saraswati" Civilization.

That's odd in part, perhaps, because no Saraswati River exists today. But by logic, archeology, modern technology (such as NASA's LANDSAT, French SPOT, and Indian Remote Sensing satellite photography), and the continuing location and unearthing of the many cities of this civilization, we know that such a mighty river once did exist and that many of the major cities of this civilization were established along its very banks.

Where did the river go? And in what ways can we demonstrate that the Saraswati was central to the civilization? What more might we learn about the civilization once its written language is decoded?

To understand the rise and fall of this civilization, we have to go way back, very far back — basically to about fifty million years ago. We must go back to the time that the Gondwana supercontinent was on the move. That was the time when it was "cruising along at the speed of 15 cm. a year" and heading in a northeastern direction; as a result, it inevitably crashed into Eurasia. Its leading edge slid under the Eurasian plate, uplifted the latter (creating the world's tallest mountain range, the Himalayas, which are still rising up today, and the Tibetan plateau), and attached the subcontinent of India to Asia.

Of somewhat lesser impact was the creation from this mighty crash of a series of hills, over which water could flow — and also of geologic faults.

Soon, water was running down from these hills via many rivers. They generally headed in a southerly direction, toward the Indian Ocean. Among these rivers was one — the mighty Saraswati — on whose banks many inhabitants eventually settled. Then, later on, the early Aryan residents of India, the people who had famously migrated into India across the Hindu Kush from Central Asia, came along.

These Aryans gave birth to great literature, writings that rank among the world's most beautiful, mellifluous, and incisive early works of religion and philosophy, especially the Vedic Scriptures and the Upanishads; these, though composed over many centuries, were first passed down orally and then written down, eventually, in Sanskrit, an Indo-European language. Like the civilizationally-central Homeric poems in Greece, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, these verses sang of the many beliefs of the composers. They also told of the particular local geography they valued.

The *Rig Veda*, the oldest of these scriptures, referred to the river Saraswati frequently. The river was a source of sanctification, purification, fertility, and good fortune for those who bathed in her abundant waters. And so great was the river, in fact, that Saraswati was destined to become deified for later residents of India, many of whom know her to this day as a goddess of knowledge, music, art, wisdom and learning.

Heraclitus famously asked us if one can bathe in the same river twice. Luckily, he didn't live in India. For with the Saraswati, at one point he couldn't bathe twice in the river, because it actually disappeared underground. How could this great gusher of water simply disappear? Where did it go?

Probably, because the remnants of that old huge collision between the supercontinent Gondwana and Eurasia remained around to curse mankind periodically, its demise came via earthquakes. It is likely, as Danino leads us to conclude, that tectonic plate action led to the relocation of the high-up headwaters. Water that previously had flowed into the Saraswati now lent its bounty instead to the (eventually, moving west) Sutlej River, flowing into the Indus, and to the (eventually, moving east) Yamuna instead of the Saraswati.

These geologic upheavals condemned the poor Saraswati to end up sinking into the sand, its banks shrinking away, occasionally disappearing and sometimes reappearing en route to its new terminus in the Rann of Kutch, a vast mud flat. But with the advent of modern, sky-based satellite imagery and other sources, we can make out once again the sacred, huge riverbed, vast and far flung.

Archeologists can unearth the land that lies in this riverbed and find still moist layers containing soil of unmistakable Himalayan origin.

At the same time, we can unearth the presence of many settlements that once thrived on the banks, and we can prove, more or less, that the Saraswati of Vedic times did indeed exist and that it was a major center of the civilization known generally as the Indus Civilization.

Moreover, it turns out that the Saraswati River Valley settlements, along with the towns of the Indus River Valley (where the ruins of the 40,000-to-50,000-person city of Mohenjo Daro [Mound of the Dead] were found laid out on the right bank of an abandoned bed of the river), plus settlements arrayed next to additional small rivers, provided a fundamental building block of modern India.

As a result, perhaps, of these findings we can bid farewell to the idea that the lighter-skinned Aryans actually “invaded” India, bringing their brilliant culture with them. Instead, we can see that the Vedic Scriptures, then the Brahmanas, and then the Upanishads, and other foundational writings were based on the ideas and images and culture of the Indus-Saraswati civilization, only expressed now in Aryan language, an Indo-European medium of communication.

Rather than reveling in a civilization that erupted *ex nihilo* as the result of an invasion, India was probably then, as now, a melting pot of ideas, and languages — a place that welcomed immigrants who enriched all, expanding the culture. Perhaps the whole idea of the invasion of these brilliant Aryans from Central Asia was essentially the manifestation of, and a scholarly justification for, the later British invasion of India, which also would justify the earlier Arab and Muslim invasions of India.

“O Ganga, Yamuna, Sarasvati, Shutudri, Parushni, hear my praise!” sang the poet. The great German author Max Müller thought that in this hymn the rivers invoked are “the real rivers of the Punjab, and the poem shows a much wider geographical horizon than we should expect from a mere village bard.”

According to the poem, the Saraswati flows between the Yamuna and the Sutlej, precisely where we find today that the ancient, but sunk, riverbed runs. The later Mahabharata reports legends to explain the disappearance of the Saraswati, as did the Puranas and even subsequent literature. But the end in all these accounts was the same: Into the desert the river was fated to go.

Now, as Danino writes, we know that the civilization itself had several heartlands: Baluchistan, the Indus basin, the Saraswati basin, and Gujarat. It was densely populated between the fourth and the second millennia BCE. Mostly, it was centered on two great rivers, like Mesopotamia; here it was likely the Indus and the Saraswati.

Using a chronology Danino provides on Page 98, we can divide up the civilization’s period of efflorescence from roughly 5500 BCE to 1300 BCE.

The Early Age extended from either 5500 BCE or 3300 BCE to 2600 BCE; the Mature period, from 2600 BCE to 1900 BCE, and the later period from 1900 BCE to 1300 BCE.

Some have dated the civilization back further still, to 7000 BCE, estimating the age of a site in Baluchistan known as Mehrgarh. Danino reports that other Neolithic sites currently are being explored. One has produced several radiocarbon dates in or before the fifth millennium; “if confirmed, they would open new horizons on the antecedents of Harappan culture in the Saraswati basin.”

The urban order of this civilization collapsed at 1900 BCE. For reference, we may date the Aryan arrival period at roughly 1800 BCE.

What does Danino give as the girth of this civilization of about 2400 settlements? He writes that it spanned roughly 8,000 square kilometers, the size of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia put together. Sites have been found along the coast of South Asia, not far from Iran, in northern Afghanistan, plus across much of the land held by Pakistan and India today — thus, “a vast expanse.”

Research reveals a highly complex society, one “in the full blaze of civilization,” summarizes an expert on the Rig Veda. (Page 257) There is partial evidence that the language has passed on Semitic and Aramaic influences. The French poet La Fontaine claimed that the source of his stories was ancient India; thus, the parable of the Fox and the Crow has its origins there, if art uncovered in the Indus Valley Civilization digs is to be credited.

Trade with foreign lands flourished, and evidence exists of commerce with far-flung Afghanistan, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, and elsewhere, some proofs going back to 2500 BCE or earlier. Measurements and weights were standardized. There was apparent peace in the realm — no war or worship of war.

The most conspicuous feature of the civilization, according to Danino, was the sophistication of its urbanism. We find fortifications, an acropolis or citadel in every city, a rich and a poor neighborhood, great central baths, colleges, granaries, assembly halls, and streets that were wide and aligned along the cardinal directions.

The culture was egalitarian. Indus cities did not center on magnificent quarters for rulers, but they did bring to ordinary citizens amazing features; that is, there may have been elites, but no kings are to be found. The one innovation that struck me as most impressive was the fact explained on Page 104 that most houses had their own bathrooms, each built on a sloping platform of close-fitting fired bricks, with a drain through the outer wall taking waste waters to a collective sewer. The latter was connected to a network of drains made of carefully aligned baked bricks.

“Such a sanitary system, unrivalled in the ancient world till the Roman Empire — which developed some 2000 years later — could function only on the basis of certain conditions.” This meant that the architecture was based on rigorous calculations with entire neighborhoods erected on massive common platforms of bricks. Drainage systems were omnipresent. There must have been, as well, speculates Danino, municipal workers or civil servants to inspect the water works and soak pits regularly and to keep them clean, fully functional.

What would Karl Wittfogel, with his hydraulic theory of civilization, have made of this ancient civilization? It seems that it might have provided proof for his premise of large bureaucratic organization required to run water systems, only minus the main point he pushed — Oriental Despotism.

To provide for this engineering triumph there was a plentiful water supply. The city of Mohenjo-daro, for example, had an estimated 600 to 700 wells.

First, experts comment that social conditions for the residents of these cities were far in advance of what was then prevailing in Mesopotamia or Egypt. “There is nothing we know of in pre-historic Egypt or Mesopotamia or anywhere else in Western Asia to compare with the well-built baths and commodious houses of the citizens of Mohenjo-daro,” wrote one investigator.

He pointed out that money had generally been spent elsewhere, in other early civilizations, on kings, but in the Indus Valley civilization, “the picture is reversed, and the finest structures are those erected for the convenience of the citizens.”

Second, this allowed for ritual purification through water. This element of religion has persisted and is often found in modern manifestations of Hinduism.

True, our understanding of the civilization is still in its early phases, but the findings over the past half century are impressive. A major controversy, however, divides scholars. Many of them now believe that there are a whole lot of bridges to be found between the Harappan and the Vedic cultures; they believe that the legacy of the Indus-Saraswati civilization reveals a cultural continuum.

They ask: What real evidence is there that Gangetic culture diametrically opposed that of the Indus-Saraswati civilization? Further, how and when did the civilization fall apart? Possibly this brilliant civilization declined and disintegrated because they overstretched themselves. Possibly not.

Fascinatingly, an increasing number of contemporary scholars argue that actually this early civilization didn't fall apart at all. It may have simply continued on, evolved.

If so, perhaps there is no total break, no caesura at all, in the history of the northern reaches of the Indian subcontinent. Clearly, many of the measurements that this civilization utilized have remained; many of the artistic forms and artifacts they designed in Harappa have continued. Further, a good part of the Vedic Scriptures is based, in general, on events of this civilization, and they inform the opinions and values of many today.

The author makes the fascinating point that the Aryan theory of civilization collides with the fact of the drying up of the late Saraswati in the late third millennium BCE. Did the Vedic Scriptures go on at such great length about a bountiful river that was no longer present when the Aryans arrived in the neighborhood? Danino maintains that the hymns which praise the Saraswati and are found in the oldest books of the Rig Veda clearly were composed while the river was still flowing — no later than the third millennium BCE. But how could the Rig Veda have recorded it as a major river, one along which major events occurred, if the songs were written between 1500 and 1000 BCE?

In addition, Danino argues, there is no real evidence of the actual Aryan arrival; there are no artifacts, no class of pottery, little to provide us with evidence of when the Aryans arrived in Northwest India. They came to the area occupied by people of the declining Indus-Saraswati civilization. He writes: “In other words, the arrival of the Aryans — an event which, we are told, would radically change the face of the subcontinent’s cultural and linguistic landscape — is completely invisible on the ground.” (Page 258)

Finally, the late world historian J.M. Roberts stated in *The Penguin History of the World, Third Edition* (1995) that, although “no doubt much violence marked their coming,” nonetheless “it seems clear that the Aryans brought to India no culture so advanced as that of the Harappans.” (Page 120)

Perhaps the Indus-Saraswati civilization is the Vedic civilization, with the addition of Indo-European language and writing, although we can’t prove it because the script of the original Indus-Saraswati civilization has not yet been deciphered. Only time will tell.