

In Defense of India's Ancient Culture
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PART I

This article was inspired by a two-part series, entitled, "An Open Letter to Bangaru Laxman," that appeared in The Hindu, (10-11.10.2000), written by Gail Omvedt. It is not difficult to understand what prompted Ms Omvedt to write such a letter. In describing herself as "leftist, liberal and secular," it suggests that there is commotion and consternation in the ranks of her fellow travelers because of the elevation of a Dalit to the presidency of the Bharatiya Janata Party. That apart, I feel compelled to state certain facts about the sensitive issues she raises. There will no doubt be many other readers more disturbed than I in reading her piece, and no doubt the newspaper has received numerous protests due to its offensive tone in dealing with the most sacred Scriptures in Hindu culture and tradition. Then again, Hindus being as they are, perhaps none will complain about the insults hurled at them, or at least voice their complaints.

The historicity of the Rig Veda, as postulated by Omvedt, can be left to the specialists in this particular field, since as of the past fifteen years an entirely new breed of researchers has arisen, thankfully, to correct errors and misconceptions that have persisted in academia for over a century. These new insights have definitively exploded the myth of an Aryan Invasion. Suffice to state in this regard that Omvedt reveals herself to be hopelessly out of touch with this new and definitive research, supported even by the latest technology in genetics and satellite images, for example, those that reveal the now underground existence of the sacred Saraswati River, long thought to be simply "mythical". Though I am not an historian, I do have certain credentials that allow me to assess an article such as this in a proper perspective.

In keeping with my speciality, I wish to focus on the cosmological issues raised in the first paragraph of Omvedt's Open Letter, Part II. She writes, Why, I wonder, is there so much fixation on the Vedas anyway? And why do so many of those connected with your party seem to feel the need to claim that the Aryans originated in India? To take the second question first, originally Lokmanya Tilak and all other elite thinkers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were quite happy to agree that Aryans came from outside of India, even claiming that their original home was in the Arctic.

These points require elucidation, in particular Tilak's Arctic theory around which he sought to construct his interpretation of the Invasion Myth, a pressing issue of his day in academic circles, largely inspired by Indologists from abroad. But the references can only be clarified on the basis of the cosmological knowledge that was the foundation of the Rig Veda and which Omvedt lacks. Indeed, even the Lokmanya lacked this knowledge, without which it was quite reasonable for him to suggest that certain enigmatic verses might have indicated a descent from the Arctic of the mythical Invaders. Therefore, Omvedt need not be disturbed by her lack of cosmological preparation since she is in very good company. I propose to show why Lokmanya Tilak was mistaken and why no cosmologist of the day was able to correct his misconception, insofar as the cosmology of the Rig Veda had long since been set aside in India.

Tilak suggested that the Aryans might have descended from the Arctic region because of his reading of certain enigmatic verses which ostensibly describe a six-month Day and six-month Night. Without proper insight into this Veda and its cosmological content of a particular school, it would seem that when taken as history this reference could be justified only if one searched for such a situation, or an approximation at least, somewhere on the globe. Seeking to read history into this Veda and a purely external or physical rendition of the sacred Hymns, would legitimise his interpretation. But when one is versed in the cosmology of this ancient Tradition -- and I must make a distinction between that School and the astrology and cosmology practiced in India over the past millennium - then there is no enigma in the verses at all. The six-month Day and six-month Night refers to the Laws of Equivalence whereby the Year -- central protagonist of the Rig Veda -- is equivalent to one day, six months (12 hours) of which are night, and six of day. A relative of this Law is the division of the year into Night and Day as in the hemispheric divisions, Dakshinayan and Uttarayan, or the southern and northern hemispheres, the former referring to cosmic midnight and the latter to cosmic midday. However, what may surprise readers is that we find the Law intact and still a basic feature of so-called Western Astrology in the Secondary Progression (of a horoscope) where it reads, "One day for a year", in exactly the same way that the year was divided and used in the ancient Vedic School. Since this knowledge has long since been set aside in India, it is not surprising that no astrologer or cosmologist was able to point out the misconception and interpret rightly these verses.

The foundation of the Rig Veda, or rather the language it employs and assumes its readers to be fully acquainted with, is cosmological. One may seek in the Hymns a spiritual, mystical or even ritualistic content, but these must be supported by an understanding of this cosmic script.

Without this, no proper and complete sense can be made of its enigmatic verses, as Omvedt's article itself illustrates. To discuss Einstein's Theory of Relativity, at the very least a knowledge of the fundamentals of physics is required, nay, demanded. The ancient way also has its language, its science. Why is it that researchers today feel themselves free to tear apart these teachings without even a minimal preparation in the science upon which they were founded?

The next point, connected to the above in Omvedt's treatment, concerns the question she poses: Why does the Sangh Parivar find it so important to prove that the Aryan civilisation was indigenous and not an import? The reason can again be found in a cosmological assessment of the problem. This involves a very basic, essential premise at the root of all Vedic thought: Fullness versus the Void.

This statement is substantiated by quoting some of the most profound utterances of all times and preserved in the Atharva Veda, so dear to all Hindus (let us ignore the irreverent ridicule Omvedt casts on this most sacred text), regarding Skambha, the cosmic Pillar: From fullness he pours forth the full; the full spreads, merging with the full. We eagerly would know from whence he thus replenishes himself. (AV X.8.29.) Or else, the more familiar verses from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: That is Fullness, this is Fullness, from Fullness comes Fullness. When Fullness is taken from Fullness, Fullness remains. (BU V,1.10.)

It may seem far-fetched to connect the premise of Fullness versus Emptiness to the conviction in a growing section of the population that the Aryans did not descend upon India from beyond but evolved right from this sacred soil. However, it is not at all far-fetched. A person of true nationalist spirit has to feel intensely disturbed by this Aryan Invasion Theory because though he or she may not be in a position to articulate properly a reaction in any cosmological terms, a rejection of the theory does indeed arise from a grounding in India's most ancient culture and tradition; and it is at this ancient culture that the Theory was aimed in an attempt to undermine its most sacred and sustaining premises. As such there has to be a rejection from a true Indian whose soul vibrates to these ancient truths.

To elaborate, from a less philosophical postulation to a more realistic assessment of the power struggle in colonial times, and the need to subjugate an ancient civilisation whose culture proved almost impossible to eradicate, the claim that the Aryans were invaders from beyond was a vitally important tactic and had little to do with linguistics, scholarship, or even an historical Dravidian versus Aryan civilisational divide.

Rather, if Indians could be brainwashed to the degree that they would accept this theory as fact, and this could be connected to their most sacred Scriptures, then Hindus could just as easily accept a modern invasion from beyond India's borders, since essentially she was empty and void of any true indigenous roots and culture in the first place. This would grant any coloniser who so desired a right of passage into India to "fill that void" of the ages, dating back to the Rig Veda which "proves" the theory.

But we all know that it does not. The Rig Veda makes no mention at all of any such migration, much less of an invading civilisation advanced to such a degree that it was capable of envisioning and recording, in a relatively brief span of time from the supposed date of its arrival, a Scripture of the high quality of the Rig Veda, with its obvious cosmological content; a study of the Creation Hymn makes that clear enough. The Aryan Invasion Theory is a lie, a deliberate fabrication devised to further brainwash and subjugate an ancient people by striking down the most sacred of all Vedic precepts: Fullness and not the Void.

If Gail Omvedt and her companions believe that I exaggerate, let us apply the same premise ("...from Fullness comes Fullness...") to music, Indian classical music, particularly Carnatic. We all know that the music of India has a cosmological basis. But similar to the "lost measure of the year", discussed above, the precise knowledge of this cosmic structure is in large part lost as well, though it lives on in the music, in the same manner in which it lives on in the Vedic Chants; or else in the worship of the many Gods and Goddesses of Hinduism, though their precise connection with the Cosmic Energies they embody is now ignored by the populace. The key lies in the simplest and perhaps most overlooked component of classical music; the Shruti.

As a Westerner and like so many of her compatriots, perhaps Gail Omvedt is also disturbed by the relentless, ceaseless drone of the Shruti if she listens to classical Indian music. It must surely appear to her as if the musicians began by tuning their instruments together to this pitch and forgot to turn it off, and so it droned on and on and on! This is a pity because, once again, the Shruti in classical music harks back to the same premise, Fullness and not Emptiness. It is a rendering in the language of music of the same Vedic precept that creation and the universe do not arise from a Void but rather from that sacred Fullness. Thus, the Shruti is silence given sound so that never is there emptiness in the execution of the raga. The raga (or silence in movement) which arises from that Sound/Silence and dips back into it periodically, is ever sustained by the Shruti and never collapses into a void, into an emptiness or nothingness.

It is the perception of Skambha, support of the worlds, even as the Shruti "supports" the raga. In classical Indian music it is this seemingly insignificant drone that preserves the most ancient truths of the Veda, though these may be attacked again and again, almost to extinction. The musical composition is never "void", always "full", filled with the sound of silence that is the Shruti, the inspired and revealed Word.

A bit of humility is required by types like Omvedt when approaching the Sacred, for they must know that academic knowledge is a paltry sum next to the ancient wisdom of this most sacred of all sacred lands. Omvedt's creations will die with tomorrow's dawn when a new sun arises, while the Shruti lives on and is eternal because it arose and continues to arise from a "seeing" in the eternal consciousness of India's great Vedic Seers.

PART II

Omvedt has not spared education in her harangue; and connected to the topic is the ancient caste system. Before commencing, it needs to be stated that reading texts like Omvedt's convinces me that there was a great wisdom in keeping the Sacred away from the profanities of the uninitiated. Nowhere else in her Open Letter has ignorance been more pathetically revealed. Regarding the Caste System, the Varnashrama, ever the object of Gail Omvedt's attacks, we all know and agree that it has fallen into a hopelessly and irredeemably decrepit condition and that in spite of the sincere efforts of many social and religious reformers, as well as political activists, this discredited structure nonetheless persists. Such being the case, perhaps it is wise to question why this is so. Again I must refer to cosmology, because that is the foundation of the Varnashrama. Just as Indian classical music and the arts have a cosmological structure, so too does the caste system.

To understand the connection we must take the circumscribing ecliptic of our Solar System divided into twelve parts, or the signs of the zodiac, and then into four quarters, or the four cardinal points that are still today such an important feature in temple building as indicated in Vaastu Shastra; we allot each of the four sections a particular caste. This is supported by the earliest mention of caste in the Rig Veda itself, the Purush Shukta, X,90,12: His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms became the Kshatriya, his legs the Vaishya who plies his trade. The Shudra was born from his feet.

As any astrologer knows, that ecliptic divided into four and twelve describes a body in the same way these verses do. Each sign of the zodiac has rulership over the parts of the body indicated, from Aries and the head, to Pisces and the feet, moving through the complete circle. In the Veda the connection is explicit in the description of the Cosmic Purush.

If caste persists today it is simply because of that unbroken cosmic connection which is still maintained in Hindu Culture, and it continues to permeate the entire subcontinent, influencing all of its inhabitants irrespective of their diverse religious, social or political beliefs.

Therefore, it is not surprising to find that even Christians, a vehemently casteless group, are reported to succumb in India to the class/caste malady, because so long as the cosmos lives on, and so long as there is someone to witness and read that Harmony, everything that has its foundation in that Harmony is destined to endure. The problem lies simply in an inability to focus our lens of perception so that the true Harmony comes into our vision once again, clearing away the distortions.

In point of fact, our entire global secular society is structured according to that same Harmony, the fourfold pattern of labour, trade/industry, governing body/military, and intellectuals/scientists. The latter are the new Brahmins ruling our lives. They give us today a scientific cosmology which departs from the old simply in the question of purpose. The ancient way invariably provided a "sense" to the evolution of consciousness and civilisation, and the species in general. Today's scientific cosmology merely observes and records phenomena for phenomena's sake; and given this lack of wholeness, the results are more often than not highly destructive.

The decay we know to have set in afflicted each and every segment of the caste system, not only the Brahmin. The problem began centuries ago when the "measure of the year" was lost and that script could not be read properly since the correct Zero Point was missing. It was at that time too that science became a separate discipline and parted ways with the spiritual, in India and throughout the rest of the world. Then, without the Zero Point, like cogs moving out of synchronicity with each other, the wheels of the Cosmic Clock fell into disarray in our perception, the "lens" became unfocussed. Similarly, the six-month Day and six-month Night reference could no longer be comprehended; Tilak and others had no key to unravel the mysteries. They could only be treated in the most physical sense, divorced from any reality other than the most material.

This gradually degenerated into a rigid and deterministic right/prison of birth (of all castes), and what was originally given a cosmic sanction (through a knowledgeable reading of the individual's horoscope of birth), became a meaningless yoke born of ignorance and which eventually became the shackles of society. The fourfold Order no longer accorded with an individual's worth and particular destiny in that lifetime, based on certain "cosmic credentials," as it were. The true essence of each member of society was ignored; only the determinism of birth remained. Similarly, the custom prevails today of comparing the horoscopes of contenders for matri-mony.

But just as the original meaning and purpose of the practice has been lost, and its correct utilisation for discovering the appropriateness of two individuals who desire to join together on the journey of life in the fulfilment of their destinies, so too we have today nothing but a meaningless "superstition." It is not that the custom is a superstition; the problem lies in its usage by the profane, as well as the unscrupulous.

Thus, the "secrecy" Omvedt deplores and the erstwhile restrictions prohibiting other than Brahmins from studying the sacred texts is understandable. Omvedt herself is a perfect example of the misinterpretations and shallowness of perception which abound when the texts are treated by the profane; her interpretation of Vritra and Indra as destroyers of the "dams" (!) of the indigenous people they allegedly conquered during the invasion, being a case in point. That times have changed and the world no longer accepts a formalised secrecy is also understandable, particularly in this age of the Internet and ever more pervasive tools of information technology. But it may not be too unreasonable to expect the contemporary seeker, be he/she in the spiritual or scientific field, to acknowledge with humility and reverence that the ancient Seers "saw" what modern man cannot see. The reason lies primarily in the fact that strenuous, prolonged disciplines, tapasyas, are required to attain this unique capacity. No "instant fix" will do the trick, as the Commerce of Spirituality offers today. It was a lifetime pursuit and dedication. And for any of us today who wish to tread the same path of old, it is equally a lifetime dedication, but a labour well worth while. We choose our paths today, at least most of us. But the Brahmin of those ancient times had no choice in the matter. Education for him was not a privilege, as Gail Omvedt sustains, it was a duty. The Brahmin had no choice, similar to the duty restrictions applied to the other castes. Just a few centuries ago even Kings and Queens were illiterate. Unlike in former times, today a person's worth is measured by his/her education; indeed, it has now reached the point where it is only a question of just how much money that education will bring in! We "invest" in education for our children, not for the sake of knowledge, as of old in the Brahminic tradition and worship of Saraswati, but simply for the money-power an education can buy. Writers such as Omvedt, and there are many, foist onto the ancient culture this contemporary yardstick which is totally deceiving. They are then free to make a new set of outcastes. In so doing, the result is simply a further division of society and a strengthening of the very barriers they ostensibly seek to demolish. Today we want, we demand equal opportunities for all. This is not secured by closing out, setting limits, by barring entry on the basis of former duties (read "privileges"). It should mean the opening of many, many more schools, enough to accommodate every caste and class. Above all, suited to the realistic needs of all segments of society.

In closing, mention must be made of the insidious statements Omvedt makes on the alleged closing out of Buddhism by Hindus, and the present discomfort she perceives Hindus experience when faced with a casteless Buddhism. I do believe that in this action Omvedt is highly provocative. It is as if she were provoking Hindus to react vehemently, to then further beat them with the stick of Intolerance.

The reason for a reticence in regard to Buddhism by Hindus has nothing to do with intolerance and bigotry. It is, again, a question of Fullness versus Emptiness. Buddhism struck a blow at this basic and essential premise of Hinduism, not because the Buddha chose to do so, but because the Buddha chose, in his quest for liberation, to pursue that path which plunged his consciousness into Nothingness through nirvana, or the dissolution of everything that binds one to this material creation. In a word, this was a denial of the nexus of a person's sojourn on this planet. To achieve the liberation from suffering that the Buddha sought, one would have to undermine creation itself as having intrinsic reality. To do this the Soul had to be denied its reality as that divine nexus in life, in creation, in a physical body within the cosmic manifestation. Thus, whatever was born of that cosmic design would automatically fall to the axe of Nirvana. This is again the question of Fullness versus the Void, for the Soul is the channel of that Fullness.

Following this line of thought, another non-Indian writer, Francois Gautier, in one of his regular columns appearing in The New Indian Express ("Buddhism to blame for India's ills", 25.9.2000), put the blame for foreign invasions on Buddhism. His contention is that Hindu society was weakened by the practice of ahimsa by Buddhists (and Jains), and therefore no effective resistance was offered to invading armies, starting with Alexander.

Gautier has a point. However, I would go a step farther, or rather deeper. Buddhism's emergence in the spiritual panorama introduced a radical shift in the goal of spiritual quests. Otherworldliness became the target. As this "goal" took deeper and deeper hold, the finest energies of the civilisation were siphoned off, shall we say, directed to and posited in that Beyond, depleting the civilisation of the tool that could effectively repel the invader in a truly non-violent manner. This was the formidable reservoir of soul power which gradually lost its strength, leaving an emptiness that invading armies could easily and increasingly fill. The conquering spirit of the Aryan warrior was replaced by the Ascetic and the Renouncer.

It was in this same period that the cleavage began between Spirituality and Science, until finally the Divine Measure (of the year/Earth) was lost.

Again the challenge arises: Fullness versus Emptiness, and the Soul receding under ever more dense veils. The Soul, in this context, is perceived in the Seer's consciousness as Guha, hidden under many veils, until he cuts through the darkness of the ages with his weapon in hand, and emerges as the victorious War God, son of Shiva, the myth/history of our times.

All paths do not lead to Rome, as the "secularists" would have us believe. Let us thank the Creator that they do not, for it would be a denial of the motto that governs Indian society: unity in diversity. There are many paths and not only do they have divergent methods but divergent goals as well. And when we hear the verse from the Veda bandied about that seekers know the one Truth "by many names," interpreted to mean many Religions wherein each seemingly calls the same one God by a different name, let us reflect that these perceptive words were uttered BEFORE the orthodox and exclusivist religions arose. Even today Shiva, for example, is known by 1008 names. But the Cosmic Energy that Shiva stands for is one thing, the Void is another.

This is the distinction that produces a reticence, if you will, when Hindus are confronted with the Buddhist axe of Nirvana. They need not feel ashamed or embarrassed by this discomfort for in their innermost essence they know the distinction between Emptiness and Fullness. It is the foundation of the Sanatana Dharma: eternal just as the cosmos is eternal, that fullness whence it arose and renews itself with each rising Dawn.