

Home > Magazines > Panorama > The search for the first inhabitants of the peninsula

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The search for the first inhabitants of the peninsula

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TENSING RODRIGUES

Our search for the elusive 'first Indians' seems to be taking us too far. As we saw last time, however much we try, a clear picture of the 'immediate descendants of the early OoA dispersals who evolved entirely within the Indian sub-continent' does not seem to emerge. Ancient Komkan lay at the centre of the Indian peninsula; who were the first settlers of Komkan? As of now, we can only say 'neti, neti'; 'not these, not these'. But beyond that it is all grey. At some point we had said that the kumlbli or velip were probably the 'adivasi', the 'first inhabitants' of Komkan. But then we found that there could have been some other community whom they assimilated or annihilated; the hemad for instance [Who We Are ..., 11 November 18]. Who were the hemad then, and who were the kumlbli or velip? The same problem we have faced on a broader canvas as well, the Indian peninsula; just as we came to the conclusion that the ubiquitous kur community was probably the 'adivasi', the 'first inhabitants' of the peninsula, we discovered that the ved community could be its predecessor. Our search for the ultimate 'adivasi' continues. We are grabbing every opportunity that comes our way to dig deeper. The 'bhil' was one such opportunity. We even built a bridge between the bhil and the kumlbli, based on some common terms used by the two, thereby strengthening our hypothesis of a pan-Indian kur community. But just when we seemed to be in a position to comfortably conclude, in the words of Kanakasabhai, that this was the "race which was spread over the whole of India", we stumbled upon the pawra sub-group of bhil.

Enthoven includes pawra as a sub-group under bhil [Enthoven, 1987: The Tribes And Castes Of Bombay, Volume 1, 175]. But the pawra deny that they are bhil and consider the name a reproach. What makes the dispute interesting is not the fact that they claim to be rajput, who were driven by the Udaipur chiefs from their homes near the hill fort Palgad; in that case they would be clearly of the ksatriya ancestry. But what is intriguing is the faint signals of their Austro-Asiatic or mumda ancestry; Mohanty mentions several circumstances which would suggest that; though not conclusively [Mohanty, 2013: Prolegomenon To The Bhil And Pawra Relations In West Khandesh In Maharashtra: A Reassessment Of Evidence For An Early Substratum]

There does not seem to exist any conclusive genetic evidence of mumda ancestry among the communities in the 'Gujarat, Khandesh, Rajputana and Central India' region, the homeland of the bhil. But that there is some admixture cannot be denied either. As of now, the evidence seems to come from linguistic sources. For instance, Kulkarni finds linguistic similarity between katkari and kharia, a mumda subgroup. Kulkarni uses this observation to hypothesise that the katkari and kharia must have at some point in time been in close contact [Kulkarni, 1969 : The Katkari People And Their Words for Birds and Animals, in Journal of the University of Poona, 23, 99].

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That there has been interaction between the eastern and western regions of the Indian sub-continent is undeniable. Perhaps the best known instances are the movement of the kirat from the extreme north-east to the north-west; and the movement of the kshatriya and bramhan from the extreme north-west to the north east. So the admixture of languages and ancestries is a given. But this is in the last 10,000 years or so. When we are talking about the substratum or the adivasi or the 'first Indians', we are talking about the 'immediate descendants of the early OoA dispersals who evolved entirely within the Indian sub-continent'. Could we hypothesise a more or less homogeneous community of humans across the Indian peninsula at this point of time, say 40,000 to 60,000 years ago? Perhaps we cannot expect a homogeneous community. In all likelihood some of the OoA humans moving across the peninsula remained behind at more than one location; or the search for food and water took them to different places. Perhaps climatic conditions and tectonic events scattered them. And eventually, sheer 'crowding' could have compelled them to seek 'greener pastures'. The point is that sooner or later genetic differences must have set in among the humans settled at geographically diverse places. No doubt, this evolutionary history is well recorded in the genes; it only needs to be read and understood. So it is perfectly reasonable to believe that bhil and mumda share a common ancestry; so do kharia and kumlbli; earlier the separation, lesser the extent of common ancestry, more the genetic incursions. Whether that 'common ancestry' was kur or ved or some other, is what we are unable to say. Perhaps, it will always be neti, neti! Unless the ancient DNA solves the puzzle.

It would not be fair to close this discussion without a reference to the Dravidians, whom we have preferred to call the tamil. These, all agree, are an ancient community. More ancient than the ksatriya, kirat, and bramhan? As ancient as the ved or kur? Where exactly do we place the tamil? The opinions vary between the extremes. It is tempting to begin with the Palaeolithic site at Attirampakkam near Chennai. But we have no sources to link the tamil ethnicity to it, and to bridge the long gap of about 1,60,000 years between Homo attirampakkamensis and early sprouts of tamil culture. And we have no certain evidence to prove that the tamil did not evolve from the ved or kur; nor do we have any evidence that they could have. At the other end of the prehistoric timeline, we have scholars who argue in favour of the advent of the tamil into the Indian sub-continent between 6,000 BCE to 8,000 BCE; they trace their origin to Near East. Yes, according to them the people we have called the ksatriya are the tamil; that the tamil were the architects of the Harappan Civilisation [Mahadevan, 2009: Vestiges of Indus Civilisation in Old Tamil].

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