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Tensing Rodrigues

In his brief note titled 'The Bygone Prehistoric Civilization Of Konkan', Kamat talks about the earliest colonisers of the Eurasian landmass who reached Southeast Asia and Australia by 50,000 years ago; and concludes that "in their giant leap across the Arabian Sea they had to first land in the Konkan. ... Those who preferred to stay behind with other migrants created the great prehistoric civilisation of Konkan." [Kamat, 2017: The Bygone Prehistoric Civilization Of Konkan, in Navhind Times, 14 May 2017] Without going into the appropriateness of the date, the hominin specie they belonged to – whether they were modern humans or not, and how they 'leapt across the Arabian Sea', this is indeed a bold hypothesis: that at least some of the current konkani population has directly descended from the early 'Out of Africa' dispersals.

A lot of work has been done on identifying the possible Indian communities that may have directly descended from the early 'Out of Africa' dispersals. Of course this is a very amorphous idea. It has been pursued at cultural, anatomical and linguistic level; this would be relevant for the migrations that could have happened at a relatively recent pre-historic date. But it has been pursued at genetic level as well; this would be relevant even for the earliest 'Out of Africa' dispersals. We look at all possibilities as proposed by the researchers. Our interest in it lies in the possibility of a similar search for African roots of konkani people. Just to remind you, we are in search of the answer to the question: From among the diverse konkani communities, who were the first to settle in this land?

One of the major areas of work has been to establish a link between the Africans and an Indian community that has been generally designated as Dravidian. Unfortunately the term is loaded with strong social, cultural and political undertones. So, to keep ourselves focused purely on the ethnic aspect, we avoid the term Dravidian in favour of the term tamil; for the same reason that we have avoided the term Aryan. By tamil we mean the native inhabitants of Tamilakam, whose extent we have discussed earlier. We use the word Tamilakam as the land of the tamil people, in the same way as we use the term Konkan as the land of konkani people. Neither corresponds to any current politico-administrative entity.

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In his brief correspondence of 2007, Winters asks a pointed question: Did the Dravidian speakers originate in Africa? He proceeds to demolish the thesis that the tamil are autochthonous and originated shortly after the 'out of Africa' dispersal about 50,000 – 60,000 years ago; Winters holds that genetic, archaeological, linguistic and osteological studies of tamil suggest a more recent migration. [Winters, 2007: Did the Dravidian speakers originate in Africa? in Bioessays, 29, 497] But others have been investigating this link earlier. In two papers published in the Journal of Tamil Studies in 1976 and 1980, Aravanan advances linguistic, cultural and anatomical arguments to prove the African – tamil link. He draws similarities between tamil and Senegalese languages Wolof and Pulaar. In the cultural domain he mentions three instances. The first is the tradition of 'fasting unto death', called vatakiruttal in tamil; the person desiring to die, sits facing the north and does not take any food. After death a hero stone is erected on his burial place, also facing the north. Such hero stones were common in Tamilakam and in the adjoining vadukar country; later, in the course of the brahmanisation, most of these have been converted to temples. [Vithoba of Pamdharapura, 02 Apr 17] Such a practice is still found in Madagascar. In festive times tamil rural women move anti-clock wise in a circle, bending their bodies and singing folk songs keeping beat by clapping. This is called Kummiyattam; somewhat similar to konkani fugddi. This tradition also exists in Africa. [Aravanan, 1976: Physical and Cultural Similarities between Dravidian and African, in Journal of Tamil Studies, 23] In his 1980 paper, Aravanan notes the similarity in the anatomical parameters – like cephalic index, nasal index, height, body hair, colour of skin, size of lips and forward projection of chin – of African and tamil population. [Aravanan, 1980: Notable Negroid Elements in Dravidian India, in Journal of Tamil Studies, 24]

Aravanan seems to support Winter's hypothesis of a more recent migration and a route through north-western India. This hypothesis visualizes a movement of people from East Africa, probably along the Nile valley, northwards into the Tigris – Euphrates basin (Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, etc), and thence south-eastwards into Afghanistan; entering India through the Indus valley and spreading into the Indo-Gangetic plain and across the Vindhya into the peninsula. This hypothesis envisions the Indus Valley civilization as tamil, and the eventual pushing of the tamil population into the extreme south one third of the peninsula. The first part of the hypothesis is probably acceptable easily, for that is the generally accepted first leg of the southern route of the 'Out of Africa' dispersal; in this case probably the 'Out of Africa II' or later. ('Out of Africa I' usually refers to the emigrations of Homo erectus or pre-Home sapiens; 'Out of Africa II' usually refers to the emigrations of Home sapiens. Some talk of 'Out of Africa III' as well, to denote later migrations.)

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But a fairly plausible date of dispersal of the proto-tamil Africans is difficult to come by in the relevant literature. Could it be as late as 10,000 years ago as Kanthimathi proposes? [Kanthimathi, 2008: Genetic study of Dravidian castes of Tamil Nadu, in Journal of Genetics, Volume 87, No 2, 175] Or was it significantly earlier? Has the present tamil population evolved from the 'Out of Africa II' around 40,000 years ago as suggested by the Madurai study of Wells? [Wells, 2003: Journey of Man (TV Movie), 52:01 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_R7Mlz7tQI)] Or is it an admixture of several 'Out of Africa' episodes and a more complex exchange of genes? Then there is the Attirampakkam evidence: paleomagnetic measurements and direct Al/ Be burial dating of stone artifacts now position the earliest hominin in Tamilakam not later than 10,70,000 million years ago. [Pappu, 2011: Early Pleistocene Presence of Acheulian Hominins in South India, in Science, Vol 331, 1596] These were obviously Homo erectus. Could it be possible, in that case, that Homo sapiens evolved autochthonously (indigenously) in Tamilakam? And possibly crossbred with the subsequent migrations?

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