

DISTORTING HISTORY THROUGH A CALENDAR

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

Built at the site of an infamous detention centre set up by the British government, the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT)-Kharagpur was the first IIT to be commissioned. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who gave a memorable convocation address at IIT-Kharagpur in 1956, said: “Here in the place of that Hijli Detention Camp stands the fine monument of India, representing India’s urges, India’s future in the making. This picture seems to me symbolical of the changes that are coming to India.” Notwithstanding the criticism of encouraging brain drain and generating intense admission competition among schoolgoing students, leading to the entrenchment of an unhealthy tuition culture, the premier IITs continue to have a transformative presence in India’s technical and science education system. Nehru was indeed right in saying that the IITs are India’s future in the making. But strangely, IIT-Kharagpur is in the news not for its role in shaping the future but for distorting our past to advance a particular social agenda.

In its [new calendar for 2022, IIT-Kharagpur’s new Centre of Excellence for Indian Knowledge System](#) has propagated an unscientific narrative on the beginnings of our ancestry. Titled ‘[Recovery of the Foundations of Indian Knowledge Systems](#)’, this calendar presents a very confusing collage of symbols and images with patently distorted ideas. The intention of the calendar is to establish an alternate premise that the Aryans, the carriers of Vedic culture, were indigenous to the Indus Valley and surrounding regions. This premise advances the theme that these people were the custodians of the Indus Valley Civilization that had been active for more than 10,000 years and that eventually spread its cultural influence westwards from India. This is called the ‘out of India’ theory.

Historians ignored people: Narendra Modi

As the historian Charles Allen stated in his book, such revisionism flies in the face of all the evidence — archaeogenetics, archaeological, linguistic, zoological, botanical, geographical and theological. The evidence informs us that the pre-Indian state’s civilizational beginnings are associated with the Harappans, the earliest settlers and belonging to a greater Indus Valley Civilization, whose culture extends from 7,000 to 2,000 BCE. The remnants of their settlements are located around the Indus River, Kutch, Saurashtra and parts of Balochistan and the Makran Coast. Engaged in agriculture and trade, they were adept at designing well-laid-out townships with a good system of water management. They used bullock-drawn carts. Predominantly centred on farming, these communities slowly declined as a result of increasing aridity and declining summer rainfall.

The archaeological evidence also suggests that during the late Harappan period, the Rigvedic people entered the Indian subcontinent through present-day Iran and Afghanistan. These pastoral migrants and their grazing animals including horses came in from the Eurasian steppes into the Indus Valley region, in batches, to mingle with the dark-skinned settlers of the Indus Valley. Although not an ‘invasion’ in the classical sense, as the American archaeologist George Dales had noted, “Harappans met their end not with an Aryan bang, but with an Indus expatriate’s whimper”. But the ‘in-group-out-group’ dynamics that may have played out in such a cultural landscape may have encouraged caste-based social hierarchy, allowing the resourceful newcomers to dominate and forcing the earlier settlers to be marginalised and migrate possibly southwards. The results of excavations from Keezhadi in Tamil Nadu provide further evidence of the extended spread of the non-Vedic culture towards south India until 2,200 years ago.

Recent archaeogenetic studies provide us a firmer scientific foundation to the theory of Aryan

migration from the Eurasian steppes. For instance, the mitochondrial DNA (designated haplogroup R1a1a) of some of the social groups in India share a common genetic ancestral lineage with eastern Europeans. It is suggested that haplogroup R1a1a mutated out of haplogroup R1a in the Eurasian Steppe about 14,000 years ago. Thus, these studies support the 'Out of the East European Steppes' theory. It also means that the original form of Indo-European languages was first spoken in Eastern Europe, the 'original' homeland. It is likely that a group of nomads who shared the genomic subclade R1a1a left their homeland and moved east towards the Caspian grasslands, where they tamed horses, goats and dogs and learned to build horse-drawn chariots, essential for a nomadic life. Around 1,900 BCE, these people broke up and one group proceeded towards what is now Iran, and the other to India. Those who entered India, around 1,500 BCE, established the dominant civilization in the north-west. By then, much of the older Harappan settlers had either become marginalised or had moved to southern and central India, and even to parts of Balochistan. The newly settled people, the so-called Aryans, who worshipped fire, were not builders like the Harappans but are likely to have been better story-tellers.

Who is stopping us from amending history, asks Amit Shah

Two recently published scientific papers, reporting the archaeogenomic studies of the early settlers of central and south Asia, chart the genetic trail of the hunter-gatherers, Iranian farmers and pastoralists from the Caspian steppes, and explain how they may have intermingled to become the makers of some of the world's earliest civilizations. Obtained from a skeleton of a woman from a 5,000-year-old Indus Valley Civilization settlement in the village of Rakhigarhi, in the Hisar District of Haryana, the companion paper tracks the lineage of the people who settled in the Indus Valley. The DNA from the skeleton shows no detectable ancestry from the "steppe pastoralists or from Anatolian and Iranian farmers, suggesting farming in South Asia arose from local foragers rather than from large-scale migration from the west". This conclusion, with a caveat that a single sample cannot fully characterise the entire population, reinforces the prevailing notion on the origins of the Harappan settlers. It is also likely that there could be more genetic commonality between earlier settlers from Africa and the Harappan people.

The January page of the IIT calendar starts with a statement: "The tributaries of Indus as mentioned in the Rig Veda are sourced to the Siwalik ranges in the Central-Eastern Himalayas". The Siwaliks are the low-altitude southern-most hill ranges of the Himalayas from where no major rivers are sourced. If this is not a deliberate distortion for the ease of false messaging, this apparent lack of geographical understanding for those who are pioneering the studies of Indian Knowledge Systems is shocking. That the calendar-makers resort to obfuscation of facts becomes obvious in other pages. For instance, as Meera Nanda pointed out, 'Karmic' retribution and the idea of rebirth are not part of early Vedic tradition but derived from the Buddha-Jaina streams of thought that was later incorporated in the Upanishads.

If the IIT-Kharagpur 2022 calendar is an indication of how the Indian Knowledge System is going to be deliberated in our higher learning centres, we need to be wary of its impact on the future generations. Such a Centre signals the retreat of reason and free inquiry in education.

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The Union Budget needs to maintain an accommodative fiscal stance to support the sustainability of economic growth

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