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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHRONOLOGICAL PUZZLES IN INDIAN HISTORY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO TAMIL NADU-SOME OBSERVATIONS

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Abstract

With an emphasis on Tamil Nadu's historical narrative, this essay examines the difficulties caused by chronological ambiguities in Indian history. Understanding how events are connected and how they have an impact on later developments depends heavily on chronology, which serves as the framework for historical narratives. Due to Keeladi excavations, the date of the Sangam period in Tamil Nadu, a state with a lengthy and rich history, has been reevaluated, moving its beginnings back hundreds of years. The historical account is further complicated by the questionable chronology of Classical Tamil literary works. Furthermore, there is continuous discussion regarding potential links between the early Tamil communities and the historic Indus Valley Civilization. The article digs into geological issues, highlighting the importance of Tamil Nadu's Archean rocks, which date back about 450 million years. To show off Tamil Nadu's ancient landmass, the different geological history of South India is highlighted in comparison to that of the rest of the subcontinent. The article also discusses the conundrums surrounding the evolution of language and script. The mysterious Indus alphabet, which has remained untranslated, is contrasted with the developing Tamizhi or Tamil Brahmi script, leading to the speculation that a sophisticated civilization may have developed in Tamil Nadu during the Indus Valley era. The paper concludes by highlighting the value of interdisciplinary research in solving the chronological puzzles that define India's complex past.

Keywords: Chronology-Geological History-Keeladi-Indus Script-Tamil- Brahmi

Introduction

The ordering or serializing of events or occurrences according to when they occurred in time is referred to as chronology. It's a key component of history that enables us to understand the past by setting events, advancements, and individuals in the perspective of time. A framework for comprehending historical events in a wider context is provided by chronology. It aids in our understanding of how various

occurrences are connected and how they influence later developments. Comparative analysis between various geographical or cultural areas is made possible by chronology. We can better understand how events in one area affected or contrasted with occurrences in other places. In a nutshell, chronology serves as the foundation for historical narratives. It provides the framework for deciphering and comprehending the complex web of human history and forms the cornerstone of our knowledge of the past.

Indian history is a tapestry woven with threads of diverse cultures, empires, and civilizations. However, the chronological framework of this historical narrative is not without its challenges. The rich heritage of the Indian subcontinent, spanning thousands of years, often poses a puzzle for historians, archaeologists, and academics. This article delves into some of the prominent chronological issues in Indian history, with special reference to the history of Tamil Nadu.

Chronological Ambiguities

Archaeological discoveries, like the Indus Valley Civilization (circa 3500–1500 BCE), add an additional layer of complexity. The relationship between the Vedic and pre-Vedic cultures remains a subject of intense debate among historians. The Vedic period, traditionally dated between 1500 BCE and 500 BCE, is foundational to Indian civilization. However, pinning down precise dates and events within this era is a task fraught with uncertainties. The composition of the Vedas, the earliest sacred texts of Hinduism, is believed to have spanned centuries, making it challenging to establish a clear timeline. The Mauryan Empire, established by Chandragupta Maurya around 322 BCE, marked a significant phase in Indian history. However, the precise dating of Mauryan events, including the reigns of Ashoka and his successors, is a matter of conjecture due to the limited availability of contemporaneous records.

"Definite chronological history begins about 650 BCE for Northern India. No positive historical statement can be made concerning the peninsula until a date much later. Even in the north all approximate dates before the invasion of Alexander in 326 BCE are obtained only by reasoning back from the known to the unknown. The earliest absolutely certain precise date is that just named, 326 B.C."[1]

Tamil Nadu, a state in southern India, boasts a rich and ancient history that stretches back millennia. Yet, piecing together a precise chronological account of its past is a challenge riddled with complexities. The Sangam period was believed to be from the 3rd century BCE to the 3rd century CE. But Keeladi excavations pushed this period forward by more than 3 centuries. Dating Classical Tamil literary works precisely is a task fraught with uncertainties, as they often lack explicit historical references. There's a perennial debate surrounding the possible connections between the ancient Indus Valley Civilization and early Tamil societies. Some researchers suggest that Tamil culture might have evolved independently, while others propose interactions with the Indus Valley as early as the 3rd millennium BCE.[2]

The tapestry of Indian history is intricate, woven from a myriad of cultures, empires, and civilizations. Yet, the chronological threads that bind this narrative are often frayed and elusive. Unravelling these chronological conundrums is not only an intellectual pursuit, but also crucial for gaining a deeper understanding of India's complex and diverse past.

Geological Heritage of Tamil Nadu

Pre-Cambrian or Archean rocks are the oldest rocks found in the crust of the earth. The Archean epoch is very significant because it makes up a major part of the Earth's whole geological history. During this epoch, both the first photosynthesis and the development of the environment that supports life took place.

Well, now let's start with the beginning. That is, let's see how the history of Tamil Nadu begins with the origin of the earth. It is a fact that the rocks from the origin of the earth are still found in many places in the Tamil Nadu landscape without many changes. Such old rocks are found only in Tamil Nadu or generally in southern Indian landscapes.

But, if we take Tamil Nadu, there are the Rocky Mountains called Igneous, which belong to the Archaean era, when no life of any kind appeared in the world. Since these are sedimentary rocks that do not contain any fossil remains, these rocks are known to have formed at the same time as the earth's surface. Scholars have determined that the Sangagiri rocks and Kanjamalai iron ore rocks of Salem district are Archaean or Pre-Cambrian rocks. In particular, the Kanjamalai rocks of Salem district are the oldest rocks in the world and it has been revealed that they are about 450 million years old. Similarly, Archaean gneiss rocks were first found in the Pallavaram and Mamallapuram areas of Chennai city, and the announcement of the discovery of hypersthene granite in South India in 1893 made by Thomas Oldham of the Geological Survey of India in 1892. Furthermore, it was described and given the name Charnockite2 by Dr. T.H. Holland, the Chief of the Geological Survey of India, as the oldest kind of rock in the world and a dark-coloured rock containing iron-magnesium minerals.[3] Therefore, the formation of these rocks in Tamil Nadu began in connection with the formation of the earth.

North and the Himalayas

Apart from the southern part, the rest of the Indian landmass, especially the Himalayas and the rocks found in them are relatively recent in Earth's history. It means that the age of the Himalayas is only 47 million years.[4] One of the world's youngest mountain ranges, the Himalayan range is primarily made up of sedimentary and metamorphic rock that has been raised. This impact also led to the formation of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal as well as the Arakan Yoma highlands in Myanmar.

The north-moving Indo-Australian Plate, which later split into the Indian Plate and the Australian Plate, was moving at around 15 cm (5.9 in) per year during the Upper Cretaceous, some 70 million years ago. Sedimentary rocks deposited on the ocean floor and the volcanoes that surrounded its boundaries have shown the existence of the Tethys Ocean, which was totally sealed off by the fast-moving Indo-Australian Plate around 50 million years ago. Both plates folded into mountain ranges rather than subducting into the mantle via an oceanic trench because they were made of low-density continental crust.[5] The summit of Mount Everest is formed of marine limestone from this ancient ocean, which is an often-mentioned fact used to demonstrate this process. So long as the Himalayan area was under or near the sea, the rise of the mountains was accompanied by volcanic outbursts; now that the Himalayas are in the interior of a continent, volcanic activity has ceased.[6]

The time of the Cambrian, which includes the earlier Archaean Eon, is a period between about 450 and 60 million years before the present. The grand natural phenomena that took place during this period caused great changes in Tamil Nadu as well as in other areas. Tamil Nadu was little affected by Cambrian changes. Due to this, the archaicness or antiquity of Tamil Nadu has been preserved intact.

The period between 60 million years and 23 and 1/2 million years from today is designated as the Palaeozoic Era on the geological time scale. The changes that took place in this Era and the rocks formed by it do not exist in Tamil Nadu. Even the sedimentary rocks caused by the sea swallowing the land are also not found in Tamil Nadu. In this way, the land of Tamil Nadu, generally South India was not submerged by the sea during this ancient flood and continued to be the old landmass.

About 60 million years ago, a continent called 'Gondwana' which included the landmasses of India, Australia, South America, Antarctica, Africa, and Madagascar. It is divided into lower Gondwana and upper Gondwana. The Lower Gondwana Formation rocks are fossiliferous white rocks which are still found in the Sriperumbudur area.[7] Fossilized Upper Gondwana rocks are found in the Sathyavedu region on the Andhra Pradesh border of Tamil Nadu.[8] Thus, it is clear that the landscape of Tamil Nadu has not been affected in any way during this period either.

Similarly, there were no significant geological movements, earthquakes, or volcanic eruptions during the Pleistocene epoch, when the ancestors of humans appeared. Tamil Nadu was not even affected by the Five Ice Ages that started 3 lakh years before today. This kind of peaceful environment may have given rise to the development of civilization in a few centuries.

To confirm this, Sir, Robert Bruce Foot, the father of Indian Pre-History, discovered stone-age tools in 1868 at Pallavaram in Chennai, and Atthirambakkam in present-day Tiruvallur district of Tamil Nadu. He also finds in and around a palaeolithic tool factory and some caves in the Allikuzhi range, which is located in the Eastern Ghats.

Human Origins and Early Tools

Some recent findings further confirm this fact. Santhi Pappu,[9] who is continuing his research in the Atthirambakkam area, has found more stone tools which are Acheulean type. In 1999, when they excavated the Atthirambakkam area, they found that there were eight different layers of sand. At its bottom they found nearly 3000 stone tools. When they researched it through 'cosmogenic nuclide burial dating', they found that it was 16 lakh years ago, and say that these tools are 1.5 million years old. Santhi Pappu believes that the discovery either questions the 'Out of Africa' theory of human ancestors arriving to India from Africa 130,000 years ago, or this finding moves the date of their arrival backward. According to Santhi Pappu, "These results usher in a paradigm change in terms of how we perceive human evolution and what we know about human dispersal from Africa,"[10]

What we try to establish in summary through the historical information presented so far is that the landmass of South India is more ancient when Tamil Nadu or South India is compared to North India. The land structure that appeared when the earth was formed. So why should not the southern part of India be the initial stage of all the origin and evolutionary development that took place on the surface of the earth? In the future, collaborative and interdisciplinary research should seek to answer this question.

Puzzles in the age of Language and Script

The basic difficulty with studying the evolution of language is that the evidence is so sparse. Spoken languages don't leave fossils, and fossil skulls only tell us the overall shape and size of hominid brains, not what the brains could do. About the only definitive evidence we have is the shape of the vocal tract (the mouth, tongue, and throat): Until anatomically modern humans, about 100,000 years ago, the shape of hominid vocal tracts didn't permit the modern range of speech sounds. But that doesn't mean that language necessarily began then. Earlier hominids could have had a sort of language that used a more restricted range of consonants and vowels, and the changes in the vocal tract may only have had the effect of making speech faster and more expressive. Some researchers even propose that language began as sign language, then (gradually or suddenly) switched to the vocal modality, leaving modern gesture as a residue.[11]

The history of writing refers to the history of the origin and development of various civilizations as a way of representing language through line forms. True writing appears to have emerged and developed separately in the civilizations of Mesopotamia, China, Egypt, and Central America. The writing systems that developed in the 4th millennium BCE cannot be considered sudden inventions. These are derived from earlier coding systems. Although these notational systems were not formal writing systems, they possessed certain characteristics of writing. These used object reference lines or mnemonics to exchange information. However, these do not contain direct linguistic inputs. These systems developed during the early Neolithic period around the 7th millennium BCE.

Writing was long thought to have been invented in a single civilization, a theory named "monogenesis". Scholars believed that all writing originated in ancient Sumer and spread over the world from there via a process of cultural diffusion. According to this theory, the concept of representing language by written marks, though not necessarily the specifics of how such a system worked, was passed on by traders or merchants traveling between geographical regions.[12]

Between around 2600 to 1900 BC, the Indus civilization thrived. Then, for some reason, it ceased and disappeared. It was hidden for about 4,000 years when British and Indian archaeologists accidentally stumbled upon its ruins in the 1920s. It is now regarded as the start of Indian civilization and a civilization deserving of comparison with ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia after almost a century of excavation. The partially pictographic Indus script is composed of symbols that resemble people and animals, as well as a

perplexing "unicorn." These are written on tiny terracotta tablets, steatite seal stones, and rarely on metal.

Keeladi: A paradigm Shift

It is generally believed that the Early Historic phase of Tamil Nadu began with 3rd century BCE and the second urbanization did not occur in Tamil Nadu. In contrast to this, the occurrence of large-scale brick structures and associated artifacts of high economic value unearthed at keeladi suggest that the second urbanisation too happened in Tamil Nadu around 6th century BCE as happened in Gangetic plains.

Likewise, the date of 6th century BCE is considered as date of Tamizhi (Thamil-Brahmi) based on radio metric dates recovered from Kodumanal, Alagankulam, and Porunthal excavations. But the recent scientific dates obtained for Keeladi findings push back the date to another century i.e., 6th century BCE.[13]

Among the available scripts of India, the Indus scripts considered to be the earliest one and was 4500 years old. One kind of scripts that survived between the disappearance of Indus scripts and the emergence of Tamil-Brami script is called as graffiti marks by the scholars. These graffiti marks probably are the one evolved or transformed from Indus scripts and served as a precursor for the emergence of Brami script. Therefore, these graffiti marks cannot be set aside as mere scratches.[14] If we accept the period of the Indus Valley civilization is 3500 BCE to 1500BCE, it seems that there was a writing culture in the Indus Valley civilization. We have symbolic characters as proof. But we are unable to read the script and the subject, it is unknown even to this day.

When we pay our attention in Tamil Nadu on the same thing, the period of the culture that has been found in Keeladi is 600 BCE is known. We are also aware of the scripts of this period. But we can partially read these characters. The meaning is known if so, what is the time when these readable scripts or developed characters are undeveloped like Indus Valley scripts? The question is important. The Keeladi letters, known as Tamizhi or Tamil Brahmi, have continued to be more cultured and developed scripts.

Therefore, the time when the Tamil script was unreadable like the Indus script may have been in 3500 BCE years ago. This is the hypothesis that it naturally arises.

In addition, it is worth noting that the concept has been firmly presented by Tamil intellectuals like Devaneya Pavanar that the origin of the source language of Tamil was in South India. Pavanar says that Tamil has been full of development before all other languages. Another section of intellectuals like Iravatham Mahadevan has claimed that the Indus Valley civilized language in the north is the Dravidian and the languages born from it are Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam Tulu, etc. According to the report of the Department of archaeology, Government of Tamil Nadu, "The recent excavations and the scientific dates clearly suggests that the people were living in Tamil Nadu continuously for the past 15 lakhs years and the Keeladi excavation clearly ascertained that they attained the literacy or learnt art of writing (Tamil-Brami) as early as 6thcentury BCE during early historic period."[15] However, in contrast to these I, present a hypothesis that there must have been a developed civilization in Tamil Nadu during the time of the Indus Valley civilization.

Conclusion

In solving the historical chronology of India, particularly as it relates to Tamil Nadu. Dating crucial periods like the Vedic period and the Mauryan Empire, where ambiguities persist, presents difficulties. Our knowledge of Tamil Nadu's early history has been drastically altered by the Keeladi excavations, which have pushed the Sangam period's beginnings back hundreds of years. Geologically, Tamil Nadu's old bedrock is a testament to a continent that has undergone a staggering 450 million years of upheaval. Its unique geological history distinguishes it from the rest of the subcontinent and provides a fresh look at the area's ancient past.

The mystery is made even more complex by the evolution of language and script. When compared to the developing Tamil Brami script, the elusive Indus script, which has remained a mystery, suggests that Tamil Nadu had a highly developed civilisation

throughout the Indus Valley era. It is crucial to acknowledge the ambiguities and uncertainties that characterize India's complex past as we attempt to make sense of these historical complexities. Historians can work toward a more truthful and nuanced representation of this extraordinary land by conducting multidisciplinary research and being open to the complexity, shining light on its significant contributions to human civilisation.

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