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The Coming of the Aryans: Migration, Invasion, or Indigenous Origin?

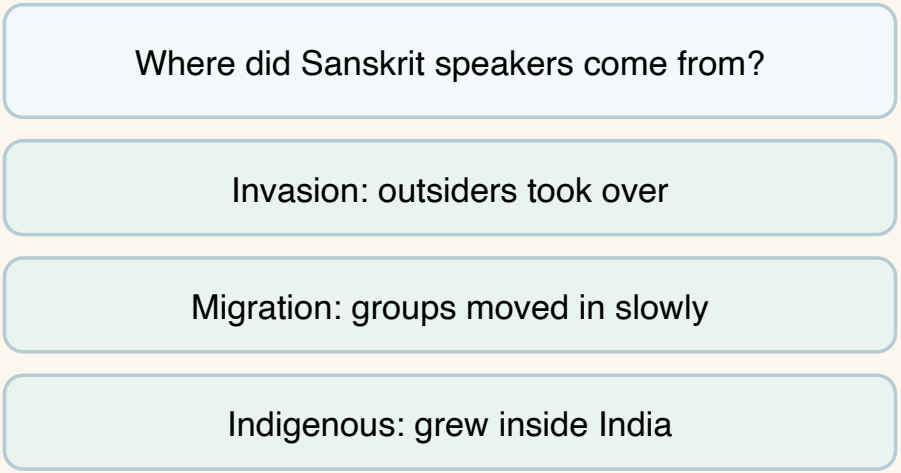
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The Coming of the Aryans: Migration, Invasion, or Indigenous Origin?

Most scientists now say Sanskrit-speaking people came to South Asia from the Central Asian grasslands. A 2019 DNA study found that herder ancestry reached South Asia about 4,000 years ago. Some Indian scholars still argue that Vedic culture grew inside India.

1 What is the Aryan debate about?

The debate asks where the speakers of Sanskrit came from. Sanskrit belongs to the Indo-European family, a large group of related languages. The question is whether its speakers arrived from outside India or grew up inside it.



One question, three answers. DNA now helps test them. Original explanatory diagram.

What are the three views?

- The invasion view says outsiders came by force and took over.
- The migration view says groups moved in slowly over many years and mixed with local people.
- The indigenous view says Vedic culture grew inside India from the Harappan people.

Which view do the new DNA studies back?

- The 2019 Science paper links Steppe herder ancestry to the spread of Indo-European languages.
- Vasant Shinde, a co-author of a second paper, said his data "completely sets aside the Aryan Migration/Invasion Theory".
- His co-authors did not accept that reading, as card 6 shows.

Think it through. Why did one question produce three views?

Old texts and old pottery cannot show who a person's parents were. Each view fills that gap with a different guess. DNA now tests those guesses.

What is the memory hook?

Think "invasion, migration, indigenous: three guesses, DNA tests them".

> **Quick check 1.** The invasion view says outsiders came by force and took over. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov; scroll.in

2 How does language point to a shared past?

The Indo-European family stretches from Britain to Bangladesh. Its members include Sanskrit, Greek, Pali, English, Persian and Hindi. Languages in one family come from one older speech. That is why scholars ask where the first speakers lived.

How close are Vedic and Avestan?

Avestan is the old language of the Avesta, the holy book of ancient Iran. Macdonell says whole Avestan verses can be turned into Vedic word for word. He adds that the Indian branch split from the Iranian one only a short time before Vedic literature began.

Why does this matter for the debate?

- Two languages this close suggest one people split into two groups.
- Language alone cannot tell which group moved, or when.
- That is why scientists turned to ancient DNA.

Think it through. Why is a shared word not proof of a move?

A shared word can travel by trade or by talk. Only DNA from old graves shows whether people moved too.

What is the memory hook?

Think “Vedic and Avestan are twins”.

> **Quick check 2.** Whole Avestan verses can be turned into Vedic word for word. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: scroll.in; gutenberg.org

3 What does the Mitanni treaty show?

Mitanni was a kingdom in northern Mesopotamia, strong between about 1500 and 1240 BCE. A treaty between the Hittite king Suppiluliuma and the Mitanni king Matiwaza lists gods as witnesses. They are Indra, Mitra, Varuna and Nasatya. The treaty dates to the 14th century BCE.

Why is the treaty famous?

- Indra, Mitra, Varuna and Nasatya are also Rigvedic gods.
- So names from the Vedic world were known in West Asia by about 1400 BCE.
- The World History Encyclopedia says both Indo-Aryans and Indo-Iranians honoured gods like Indra, Mithra and Varuna.

What does it not show?

- It does not show that Indo-Aryan speakers ruled Mitanni.
- It does not show that these people came from India.
- It shows only that these gods were known there.

Think it through. Why is the treaty a clue, not a verdict?

It tells us where certain god names were known, and when. It does not tell us who carried them.

Which exam question tests this?

An old quiz on this page asks which four gods the Mitanni treaty names. The answer is Indra, Mitra, Varuna and Nasatya.

What is the memory hook?

Think “Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Nasatya: witnesses at Mitanni”.

Quick check 3. The Mitanni treaty proves that Indo-Aryan speakers from India ruled Mitanni. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: worldhistory.org; list.indology.info

4 What did the 2019 DNA study find?

An international team studied 523 ancient people. Ancient DNA is genetic material taken from old bones. Ancestry means which earlier groups a person's genes come from. The team traced how South Asian ancestry formed.

What are the main results?

- Steppe ancestry came from herders of the Eurasian grasslands.
- It reached South Asia in the first half of the second millennium BCE.
- It now makes up to 30% of the ancestry of some South Asian groups.
- The Steppe ancestry in South Asia matches that of Bronze Age Eastern Europe.

What do the authors say about language?

The authors say these movements were "likely conduits for the spread of Indo-European languages". They say "likely", not "proved". The paper is a strong clue, not a final answer.

Think it through. Why "up to 30%" and not "30%"?

Groups differ. Some have little Steppe ancestry and some have more. The top figure is the highest found.

What is the memory hook?

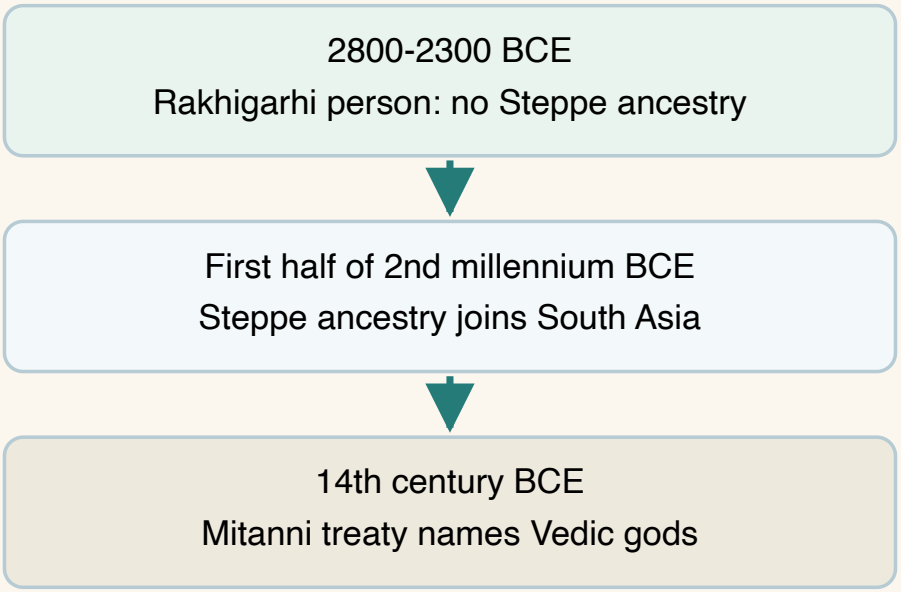
Think "523 people, second millennium BCE, up to 30%".

Quick check 4. The 2019 Science paper studied 523 ancient individuals. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov; scroll.in

5 What did the Rakhigarhi genome show?

Rakhigarhi in Haryana is the largest known Harappan site, about 550 hectares. A paper in the journal Cell studied DNA from one skeleton buried there. The code for that person is I6113. Radiocarbon dates from the site run from 2800 to 2300 BCE. Most fall in the mature Harappan phase.



The three clues in time order. The dates come from the cards above. Original explanatory diagram.

What did the DNA say?

- The person had no Steppe herder ancestry at all.
- Their ancestry came from Iran-related people and Southeast Asian hunter-gatherers.
- The paper says Steppe ancestry was not “ubiquitous” in northwest South Asia during the Harappan period.

What does one skeleton prove?

- It shows that this one Harappan person had no Steppe ancestry.
- It does not rule out a later arrival of Steppe people.
- The 2019 Science paper puts that arrival after the Harappan peak.

Think it through. Why can a Harappan with no Steppe genes still fit the migration view?

The migration view says Steppe herders came later, in the second millennium BCE. A person from the Harappan period comes before that.

What is the memory hook?

Think “I6113: Harappan, no Steppe ancestry”.

> **Quick check 5.** The Rakhigarhi individual I6113 had Steppe herder ancestry. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

6 Why do experts disagree?

Both papers came out in September 2019. Shinde issued a press release on 6 September. He said the data “completely sets aside the Aryan Migration/Invasion Theory”. Other authors of the studies did not

agree.

What did the other authors say?

- Narasimhan said of Shinde's claim that the Harappans were the Vedic people: "I at least cannot make such an interpretation."
- Nick Patterson said: "I disagree with Dr Shinde that the people of the Indus Valley spoke an Indo-European language."
- Niraj Rai said the Shinde claim was "not my statement".

Where do they agree?

They agree on the DNA facts. The Rakhigarhi person had no Steppe ancestry. Steppe ancestry did reach South Asia later. The dispute is about what these facts mean for language and culture.

Think it through. Why can one dataset lead to two opinions?

Data tells us who someone's ancestors were. It does not tell us which language they spoke. That step needs more argument.

What is the memory hook?

Think "same data, different readings".

> **Quick check 6.** Shinde's co-authors agreed that the Harappans were the Vedic people. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: scroll.in; pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

7 What happened at Rakhigarhi in 2026?

On 22 June 2026, All India Radio reported a transfer of skeletal remains from Rakhigarhi. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) handed them to the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI). A newly signed

Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) covers the transfer.

What are the details?

- The ASI dug eight burials at Mound No. 7 in the 2025-26 field season.
- Mound No. 7 was already known as a cemetery.
- Three complete skeletons and fragments from other burials went to the AnSI lab in Kolkata.
- The report calls Rakhigarhi the largest known settlement of the Indus-Saraswati Civilisation.

Why does it matter?

The report says the move should speed up research on this major urban centre. New DNA work may add to the 2019 results. Treat any later finding as new evidence to read with care.

Think it through. Why move bones to a second survey?

The ASI digs. The AnSI studies human remains. Each body does the part it is built for.

What is the memory hook?

Think “ASI digs, AnSI studies, Kolkata lab”.

> **Quick check 7.** The ASI sent the Rakhigarhi skeletal remains to a lab in Kolkata in 2026. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: newsonair.gov.in; pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

8 Which mix-ups should you avoid?

Keep the clues, the studies and the claims apart.

Clue	Remember it for
Mitanni treaty	14th century BCE, four Vedic gods as witnesses
Science paper 2019	523 people, Steppe ancestry, up to 30%
Cell paper 2019	Rakhigarhi person I6113, no Steppe ancestry
Shinde's press release	Harappans as Vedic people, not backed by co-authors
ASI to AnSI, 2026	Skeletons from Mound No. 7 sent to Kolkata

What else do students mix up?

- The treaty shows gods known in Mitanni. It does not prove who ruled there.
- One Harappan skeleton does not decide the whole debate.
- "Migration" and "invasion" are not the same word. Migration means slow movement.
- A press release is not the same as the paper behind it.

What is the memory hook?

Think "clue, study, claim: keep them apart".

> **Quick check 8.** A press release always matches the paper behind it. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov; scroll.in; worldhistory.org

Practice MCQs

1. The 14th-century BCE Mitanni-Hittite treaty names four gods, also found in the Rigveda, as witnesses.

Which gods are these?

A. Agni, Surya, Soma, and Rudra

B. Prajapati, Indra, Varuna, and Vayu

C. Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, and Indra

D. Indra, Mitra, Varuna, and Nasatya

See answer ↓

2. About how much of the ancestry of some modern South Asian groups can come from Steppe herders, per the 2019 Science paper?

A. Up to 30%

B. Up to 3%

C. None at all

D. Over 70%

See answer ↓

3. When did Steppe ancestry integrate into South Asia, according to the 2019 Science paper?

A. First half of the second millennium BCE

B. Before 5000 BCE

C. During the Mauryan age

D. After 500 CE

See answer ↓

4. What did the Cell paper find in the DNA of the Rakhigarhi individual I6113?

A. No Steppe herder ancestry

B. About 30% Steppe ancestry

C. Mostly Anatolian farmer ancestry

D. Only African ancestry

See answer ↓

5. Which body received the Rakhigarhi skeletal remains from the ASI in June 2026?

A. Birbal Sahni Institute

B. National Museum

C. Anthropological Survey of India

D. Deccan College

See answer ↓

6. What does the Mitanni treaty most safely show?

A. Indo-Aryan speakers from India ruled Mitanni

B. The Rigveda was composed in Mitanni

C. Vedic god names were known in West Asia by the 14th century BCE

D. Harappans traded with the Hittites

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** The answer is Indra, Mitra, Varuna and Nasatya. A treaty between the Hittite king Suppiluliuma and the Mitanni king Matiwaza names them as witnesses. The treaty dates to the 14th century BCE. It shows these god names were known in West Asia, not who ruled Mitanni. Memory hook: Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Nasatya. ↑ Q1
2. **A.** The answer is up to 30%. The paper sequenced 523 ancient people and traced Steppe ancestry into South Asia. The figure is a top value, since groups differ. Memory hook: 523 people, up to 30%. ↑ Q2
3. **A.** The answer is the first half of the second millennium BCE. That is after the Harappan peak. The authors call such movements likely conduits for the spread of Indo-European languages. Memory hook: second millennium BCE. ↑ Q3
4. **A.** The answer is no Steppe herder ancestry. The person's ancestry came from Iran-related people and Southeast Asian hunter-gatherers. This is one skeleton and does not rule out a later arrival. Memory hook: I6113, no Steppe. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** The answer is the Anthropological Survey of India. The remains from Mound No. 7 went to its lab in Kolkata under a new MoU. Rakhigarhi is the largest known Indus-Saraswati settlement. Memory hook: ASI digs, AnSI studies. ↑ Q5
6. **C.** The answer is that Vedic god names were known in West Asia by the 14th century BCE. The treaty names Indra, Mitra, Varuna and Nasatya. It does not say who ruled Mitanni or where they came from. Memory hook: names known, rulers not proved. ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** The migration view says groups moved in slowly instead. ↑ 1
2. **True.** Macdonell makes this point about the two old languages. ↑ 2
3. **False.** it is false. It shows only that these god names were known there. ↑ 3
4. **True.** It traced how South Asian ancestry formed. ↑ 4
5. **False.** it is false. The Cell paper found none. ↑ 5
6. **False.** it is false. Narasimhan, Patterson and Rai each said they did not agree. ↑ 6
7. **True.** The Anthropological Survey of India holds them. ↑ 7

8. **False.** it is false. Shinde's release went further than the papers. ↑ 8

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