Chapter 7

Religion, Skin Colour and Language: 
Arya and Non-Arya Identity in the Vedic Period

The story of the early migrations into the northwest of the Indian subcontinent of the peoples who called themselves ‘Aryas’ is probably the most ideologically charged topic in the ancient history of the region. Within this much disputed field, a particularly sensitive issue has been that of how the early Aryas marked off the ethnic boundary between themselves and the already existing populations that they encountered in the Punjab. Before about 1975, most Vedic scholars claimed that skin colour was the key marker used by the Aryas to distinguish themselves from the local peoples called ‘Dasas’ or ‘Dasyus’. After this date, most scholars preferred to argue that the Aryas used language as the key marker.

1 The essay has not been published previously. It is a considerably revised version of papers earlier presented in the Madison South Asia Conference, October 2002, and at the École de Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, March 2004. Scholars who contributed helpful suggestions include Catherine Clémentin-Ojha, Madhav Deshpande, Timothy Lubin, and Thomas Trautmann. Since much of this essay deals with textual materials in Vedic Sanskrit, I have employed diacritics throughout (without the Vedic accents) except for anglicized words like ‘Shudra’ and ‘Upanishad’.

2 As this sentence indirectly indicates, I am convinced that recent theories about the original Indian home of the Aryas are highly implausible and not worthy of serious consideration. Nonetheless, one does have to admit that the Rg-veda, the earliest written source that associated with the Aryas, does not directly refer to the presumed migration of the Aryas into the northwestern South Asia from Afghanistan. The absence of any such references make both the date and the modus operandi of the migration subject to much speculation, as will be seen from the discussion that follows. Nonetheless, the linguistic, archaeological and genetic evidence that there was such a migration is overwhelming.
of their own ethnic identity. In this essay, I will argue that the Vedic sources, particularly the *Rg-veda*, suggest that the dominant marker was religion and not skin colour nor language. These same sources do suggest, however, that skin colour was also a significant marker. On the other hand, they do not give much support to the idea that language was an important marker.

If we take early Vedic society to comprise the entire population of the Punjab and contiguous regions after the arrival of the Vedic Aryas, then the best way to categorize the Aryas in this period is as the dominant ethnic group of this society. The Dasas, once they had been conquered, evidently formed the most important subordinate ethnic group in the same society. If the Aryas and Dasas are to be labelled as ethnic groups, however, I should briefly indicate what I mean by this term.

The term ‘ethnic group’ has always been ambiguous. It implies both cultural differences and varying degrees of biological separation through endogamy. Many anthropologists have attempted to define ethnic groups in terms of a sum of objective markers, both cultural and biological, that can be identified by outside observers. As Fredrik Barth points out, however, the differences that are important for defining ethnic identities and boundaries ‘are not the sum of “objective” differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant’ (1998: 14). Barth himself emphasizes the cultural differences of ethnic groups and studiously avoids mentioning biological markers such as skin colour. Nonetheless, Barth does also claim that the endogamy-based Indian caste system, which most historians claim to have begun in the later Vedic period, ‘would appear to be a special case of a stratified poly-ethnic system’ (ibid.: 27). Another anthropologist, Pierre van den Berghe, prefers to emphasize biological differences. He goes so far as to claim that ‘both racial and ethnic groups are socially defined by real or putative common descent, and the distinction between the two types of groups is merely in the relative salience of biological or cultural markers of membership. My contention is that, in both cases, the social concern is with common biological descent, even when the markers are primarily cultural’ (van den Berghe 1996: 58. His italics.). In this paper, I accept Barth’s claim that what is important is how an ethnic group, in this case the Aryas, subjectively distinguishes itself from other ethnic groups in the same society, here the
Dasas, but I also accept that ethnic groups, including the Aryas, generally distinguish themselves using both cultural and biological markers.

Over the last ten years, a new source for understanding the human migrations of the past has come to the fore. This is the analysis of genetic information, more specifically the development of precise and rapid ways to trace small variations in mitochondrial and Y-chromosomal DNA. Through such tests scientists are now able to both identify and date human migrations into different geographical regions. In addition, the generally close correspondence of genetic differences with linguistic differences provides a useful cross check on both sets of data. Studies of DNA variations in the Indian subcontinent are still in their initial stages, but Bamshad’s study (2001) of DNA variations in modern Brahmin populations has already demonstrated the remarkable continuity of these lineages from early Vedic times and also a still earlier association between these lineages and Indo-European lineages further to the west. Soon the ambitious new Genographic Project should dramatically increase both the quantity and quality of such genetic information.

In his well-known book, *The Wonder That Was India*, first published in 1954, A. L. Basham says the following about the origins of the social system of the four *varnas*:

The four classes, priest (*brahmana*), warrior (*ksatriya*), peasant (*vaisya*) and serf (*sudra*), were crystallizing throughout the period of the *Rg Veda*. They have survived to the present day. The Sanskrit word used for them, *varna*, means ‘colour’, and suggests their origin in the development of the old tribal class structure through contact with people of different complexion and alien culture.

Basham was by no means the first to propose this idea. One of the earliest versions of the argument was proposed by the British administrator/ethnologist Sir H. H. Risley. In his book, *People of India*, first published in 1908, Risley argues that the references to

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4 This project is organized under the auspices of the *National Geographic* magazine, IBM, and the Waitt Family Foundation. The project maintains an elaborate website.

skin-colour difference between Aryas and non-Aryas in Sanskrit texts not only are means of differentiating the two groups, but are also evidence for a wider theory that he proposes and calls ‘the race basis of Indian society’.\(^6\) Another early version of the argument linking the skin-colour differences of Arya and non-Arya with varna is presented by the Orientalist administrator/scholars Arthur Macdonell and Arthur Keith in a long note on varna in their *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*, first published in 1912.\(^7\) This skin-colour and varna argument obviously overlaps with the question of the possible origins of the caste system in India. In this context, the argument has been discussed and criticized, often at length, by many anthropologists, although most such discussions contain few if any references to early Sanskrit texts. For example, Morton Klass book *Caste: The Emergence of the South Asian Social System*, in large part a criticism of views such as Risley’s, cites from all of Sanskrit (or other Indian-language) texts only the *Purusa-sukta* and Manu’s comment on it (1993 [1980]: 35-37).

Over the past twenty years, two important ancient historians, Romila Thapar and Thomas Trautmann, both once students of Basham, as I was myself, have sharply criticized the claim that the Aryas differentiated themselves on the basis of skin colour from the people they met when they entered South Asia. In this context, both Trautmann and Thapar attack the views of Risley in particular. Trautmann has labelled Risley’s argument ‘the racial theory of Indian civilization’.\(^8\) In the context of Risley’s general argument for the ‘race basis of Indian society’, both Trautmann and Thapar especially reject the idea that racial characteristics such as skin colour may have played an important role in the formation of early South Asian society. Trautmann writes (1999: 290):

> The problem with the racial theory of Indian civilization is that it is stuck in the racial essentialism of its first formulation, founded on attitudes believed to be inborn and unchanged by history. Indian civilization as we know it is certainly a product of

\(^6\) Risley 1915: 5. The first edition was published in 1908. This phrase in fact occurs only in a heading in the margin of the Risley’s text, but his emphasis on ‘race’, often explicitly described in terms of ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ races, can hardly be missed.


\(^8\) Trautmann 1999: 278. See also Trautmann 1997: 190-216.
conjuncture: the conjuncture of the people of the Indus Civilization and the Sanskrit-speakers; of Indo-Aryan, Dravidian and Munda; but not of the logic, supposed immutable, of white and black races. That the racial theory of Indian Civilization has survived so long and so well is a miracle of faith. It is high time to get rid of it.

This reluctance to see skin colour as an important visible marker to distinguish Arya from non-Arya brings Thapar and Trautmann into conflict not only with the imperial ethnologist H. H. Risley and with more traditional Indologists such as Macdonell and Keith and even Basham, but also with two important leftist historians, neither of whom can plausibly be described as advocates of a ‘racial theory of Indian civilization’. One of them, R. S. Sharma, in his 1958 book *Shudras in Ancient India*, includes a detailed discussion of the importance of skin colour in Vedic and other early Sanskrit texts (1958: 12-13). The great D. D. Kosambi, for his part, regarded skin colour as an important marker for the creation of the four varnas in the later Vedic period. In both the 1975 and 1956 editions of his *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Kosambi says (1975:98):

It may be supposed that these dasas were the descendants of the Indus settlers who had provided the surplus for Indus cities, being persuaded thereto by some method other than force, say religion. This was the beginning of the caste system in India. The word used here varna means colour, and is justified as the Dasas or Dasyus in general are spoken of as having a dark colour; the Aryans had a colour of their own, white, or at any rate lighter.

Both Trautmann and Thapar want to replace Risley’s ‘racial theory of Indian civilization’ with a theory that gives special emphasis to the role of the language differences between the Aryas and the presumably more indigenous non-Aryas in South Asia. It was mostly these linguistic differences, they claim, that fostered the creation of a consciousness of community among the Vedic Aryas and, ultimately, the emergence of a society governed by the norms of varna and jati. In other words, Trautmann and Thapar argue that the Aryas differentiated themselves from non-Aryas chiefly on the basis of
language and not on the basis of skin colour and other physical characteristics nor on the basis of religion and other cultural characteristics.

Thapar in particular wants to refer the concept of ‘Arya’ exclusively to a family of languages—namely the Aryan or Indo-Iranian family as defined by modern linguists—and unlinks this linguistic family from any specific group of people defined either by ‘race’ (by which she apparently means mainly skin colour) or even by ethnicity. In other words, for Thapar an Arya was any person who spoke an Indo-Aryan language, no more and no less. For example, she writes (1999: 33):

The questioning of the racial presuppositions of the Aryan invasion, requires a reorientation in interpreting the history of these times. If Aryan is a language label and has no racial connotation, then the historian has to explain how the language entered India and came to be established as the language of the elite. Languages come with people, but those that speak the same language need not be racially the same.

In another essay, she writes (2000b: 1134):

The notion of an Aryan race identified on the basis of an Aryan language has now been discarded. Language and race are distinctly different categories. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to discard the term ‘Aryan’ as well, using only Indo-Aryan to identify the language, or else staying strictly within the definition of aryā from Sanskrit texts where it is a linguistic and social qualifier, without the overlay of nineteenth century theories.

Here I want to argue that scholars such as Risley (and to some extent perhaps even Basham and Kosambi), on the one hand, and Trautmann and Thapar, on the other, all tend to conflate and finally confuse what the ancient Aryas of the Vedic period thought about skin colour and language with what various modern scholars have thought about them. More specifically, it seems to me that Trautmann and Thapar confuse simple colour prejudice with modern racism and also confuse general ethnic differences with the
linguistic differences of modern historical linguistics. Trautmann’s and Thapar’s implicit motive is apparently to absolve the ancient Aryas from the charge of being racists in anything like the sense of the so-called Aryans of the Third Reich. I fully agree that the colour prejudice of the ancient Aryas cannot be equated with modern forms of racism, but I also want to argue that it is not necessary to absolve the Aryas from the charge of colour prejudice in order to argue that they were not racists.

I am quite willing to accept that Risley’s ‘racial theory of Indian civilization’ is strongly coloured by nineteenth century ‘race science’ and quite agree that this theory is not only factual wrong but also morally reprehensible. Nonetheless, the historical plausibility of the mostly empirical arguments about whether the Vedic Aryas distinguished themselves from the non-Aryas mostly on the basis of religion, skin colour, or language does not depend on the ideological views and theories of those who have proposed this argument.\(^9\) Trautmann himself has emphasized just this point in the introduction to his new edited book on the Aryas (2005). Whether or not the ancient Aryas distinguished themselves from the Dasas on the basis of skin colour is an empirical question and in no way depends on racial (and racist) theories such as that of Risley.

Both Thapar and Trautmann implicitly claim that a differentiation between ‘us’ and ‘them’ on the basis of skin colour is roughly equivalent to a differentiation by ‘race’. In their views, any suggestion that the Aryas distinguished themselves from the non-Aryas on the basis of their respective skin colours is apparently equivalent to a claim that the Aryas saw themselves as members of a different and superior ‘race’. This seems to me to be a misleading exaggeration. Many modern Indians often denigrate other Indians with darker skins, but they do not look at them as belonging to a different, inferior race. In the final analysis all Indians are Indians.

\(^9\) As is well known, some recent historical scholarship—especially by scholars sympathetic to postmodernist ideas—often implicitly assumes that the plausibility of a historical theory depends more on the ideological motives of those who propose it than on its agreement or non-agreement with the historical evidence available. If there is no real way to determine whether one historical reconstruction of what ‘really happened’ is more plausible than another, this view might be true. This is obviously not a view that I share.
‘Race’, as the word is most often used today, is basically a concept invented and developed by Europeans between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The modern concept of race culminates, if that is the proper word, in Gobineau’s pseudo-scientific theory of a ‘race science’. Trautmann has argued quite eloquently against Gobineau’s theory. As Robin Blackburn and other historians of modern slavery have argued, such racist theories arose primarily in the context of attempts to justify and legitimate the European (and European colonialist) enslavement and subjugation of Africans and American Indians, principally in order to obtain cheap labour for the plantations, haciendas and mines of the Americas. It is in this context, that the use of skin colour as a marker of difference becomes clearly racist. Blackburn comments (1997: 15): ‘Thus, in the racial theory which became peculiarly associated with plantation slavery, the abstracted physiological characteristics of skin colour and phenotype come to be seen as the decisive criteria of race, a term which had hitherto had a more ample sense of family or kind, nature or culture’.

The modern idea of race, I think it is fair to say, always implies, above all, that the ‘lower’ race is innately (i.e. biologically) inferior in a way that manifests itself in lower mental intelligence, in lesser physical prowess and beauty, and in bad moral conduct. In other words, the members of the lower races are something less than fully human and can be enslaved and exploited by superior races, namely the Europeans, without a guilty conscience. Modern European Christians reinforced this use of skin colour as an indication of mental and moral inferiority with the claim that black Africans were descended from Ham, one of the three sons of Noah. In Genesis 9: 25, Ham is cursed by Noah to become a ‘slave of slaves’. The Bible does not mention Ham’s skin colour, but Biblical genealogies place do the descendants of Ham in Egypt, Libya and Ethiopia (Cush).

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10 Trautmann 2002. See also the interesting discussion of Gobineau and other modern ideologues of race in Figueira 2002 and in Cassirer 1974: 224-47.

11 See Blackburn 1997: 66-67. The ‘slave of slaves’ reading is from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Other translations give ‘servant of servants’. Either way the passage could and was used to justify specifically black African slavery. A more general Biblical endorsement of slavery is found at Leviticus 25: 38, 44-46).
I can find no clear evidence for this sort of modern racist view in Vedic literature. There is no evidence that the Rg-vedic Aryas regarded the Dasas and Dasyus as either biologically distinct (apart from skin colour) or as innately inferior in terms of intellect or strength or as divinely cursed to become slaves. The Vedic evidence does suggest, however, that the Aryas sometimes regarded the moral behaviour and character of the Dasas as inferior and certainly considered Dasa/Dasyu religion as inferior to their own. At most, however, skin-colour prejudice combined with a general ethnic and cultural disdain of this sort can labelled as a weak sort of proto-racism, it is certainly not racism in anything like the pseudo-scientific modern sense.

A related confusion between ‘biological descent’ and ‘racial connotation’ is found in Thapar’s important essay ‘The Rg-veda: Encapsulating Social Change’ (2000a: 11-40). If, as I have argued, skin-colour prejudice is not the same as racism, then it also is wrong to claim, as Thapar implicitly does, that biological descent is the same as race, if by race we imply human groups linked by biological descent that have, for that reason, different intellectual and moral capacities. Biological descent certainly exists, but race, in this sense, does not.

Thapar here stresses the ambiguous concept of race in order to discredit the idea that groups speaking specific languages generally maintain common biological descent. As we have seen, she and Trautmann consistently argue that the term Arya refers historically primarily to Aryan languages, not to racial or even ethnic groups. Against this, I would simply note that obviously language and biology are different. Obviously South Asians can become English speakers, and English speakers can become Hindi, or even Sanskrit, speakers. Nonetheless, speakers of specific languages have historically tended to maintain elements of a common biological descent. In other words, they tend to belong to communities that are in practice largely endogamous. This certainly has nothing to do with race, and also has nothing necessarily to do with skin colour prejudice.

Before finally turning to an examination of the Vedic evidence for how the Aryas distinguished themselves from the Dasas/Dasyus, I want to make a general observation about the extent to which this Vedic evidence can be interpreted literally versus the extent to which it should be interpreted metaphorically. In Thapar’s essay, ‘The Rg-veda: Encapsulating Social Change’, she claims that the Rg-veda references to skin colour are
mostly metaphorical or can otherwise be given ‘non-racial’ interpretations (2000a: 23-25). As already noted, race should not be considered equivalent to skin colour. Whether or not all, or even any, of the Vedic references to the skin colour (or dark colour in general) of the non-Aryas—namely the Dasas and Dasyus—are metaphorical or not is a separate question.

In my opinion, the idea that a metaphorical interpretation of passages referring to the colour of the Dasas/Dasyus cancels out a literal interpretation is not only unnecessary but also illogical. Even assuming that all the passages that refer to the dark colour of the Dasas/Dasyus can be given a metaphorical interpretation (itself an implausible assumption), why should we assume that the metaphor is totally separate from, indeed contrary to, physical reality? Why choose the metaphors of ‘dark colour’ and ‘dark skin’ if they do not reflect actual skin colour? Such a move seems to be to be inherently implausible. Even further, I would argue that it is precisely the passages in which the Vedic poets partly transform the dark colour of the Dasas/Dasyus into metaphors for a moral and religious ‘darkness’ that these poets’ views approach something we might call ‘proto-racism’. If darkness simply refers to skin colour, then it is no more than a visible marker of difference. If darkness refers to concomitant negative moral and religious qualities, then it has become something more racist and less justifiable.

**The Rg-veda**

As is well known, in the *Rg-veda* and other Vedic texts the Aryas distinguish themselves as a social group, or varna, from another, non-Arya social groups collectively identified as Dasas or Dasyus. In several cases the word ‘varna’ is used to refer to the two groups. The *Rg-veda* includes two references to the Dasa varna (1. 104. 2; 2. 12. 4), one reference to the Arya varna (3. 34. 9), and one reference to two unidentified varnas which may well be the Aryas and Dasas (1. 179. 6). At least 24 passages in the *Rg-veda* directly

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12 Throughout this essay, the references to the text of the *Rg-veda* and its commentary by Sayana are taken from Max Müller’s edition (*Rg-veda-samhita* 1966). I also compared the same references in the Poona edition and Aufrecht’s edition.
compare or link the Aryas and the Dasas (or Dasyus).\textsuperscript{13} Considering that Lubotsky’s word index to the \textit{Rg-veda} lists the word ‘Arya’ 38 times (in an initial position), this means that the Dasas/Dasyus are paired with the Aryas in well over half the passages in which the latter are specifically mentioned.\textsuperscript{14}

In most of the references to the Aryas and Dasas, the relations between the two are said to be hostile. In some of the hymns, however, the author refers to his enemies among both the Aryas and the Dasas. In other words, the Aryas fought among themselves as well as against the Dasas. There is some evidence that the Aryas may have occasionally allied themselves with the Dasas, but such alliances were apparently rare. For the most part the authors of the \textit{Rg-veda} hymns, all of them Aryas, repeatedly express their contempt for the Dasas and Dasyus and other non-Arya groups. Non-Aryas are also often identified as the enemies of the Arya gods, particularly of Indra, Agni and Soma. The involvement of these gods in this conflict led several modern scholars to claim that some or most of these non-Aryas were demons rather than humans. A. Macdonell suggests that even some of the \textit{Rg-veda} references to the Dasas and Dasyus refer to non-human demons (1981: 157-58). My own feeling is that most of the non-Arya groups mentioned in the \textit{Rg-veda} are likely to have been groups of human beings, including even groups such as the Danavas and Raksas-es who are almost always demons in post-Vedic literature. At the least, it is clear that the Vedic poets did not draw sharp distinctions between Indra’s human and demon enemies.

What ideological justification did the Aryas give for their hostility toward non-Aryas in the time of the \textit{Rg-veda}? As already noted, I am arguing that the evidence of the \textit{Rg-veda} strongly suggests that the distinction between Arya and non-Arya that justified Arya hostility was based, in the ideological consciousness of the Aryas themselves, on three factors: religion, skin colour, and language. Judging from the number of \textit{Rg-veda}

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Rg-veda} 1. 51. 8; 1. 59. 2 & 6; 1. 117. 21; 2. 11. 18; 2. 11. 19; 3. 34. 9; 4. 30; 5. 34. 6; 6. 18. 3; 6. 22. 10; 6. 25. 2; 6. 33. 3; 6. 60. 6; 7. 5. 6; 7. 83. 1; 8. 24. 27; 8. 51. 9; 10. 38. 3; 10. 49. 3; 10. 69. 6; 10. 83. 1; 10. 86. 19; 10. 102. 3; 10. 138. 3.

\textsuperscript{14} Here and elsewhere in this essay the \textit{Rg-veda} word references are taken from Alexander Lubotsky, \textit{A Rgvedic Word Concordance}, 2 Parts, New Haven, 1997.
references to each of these three factors, religion was the most important, followed by skin colour, with language being much less important.

Before discussing the Rg-veda evidence for this differentiation by religion, skin colour and language, I want first to emphasize that these three factors are all basically ideological in the Marxist sense that they are used by the Vedic poets to legitimate and justify political and economic domination over territory, wealth, and power. Once the Aryas had ideologically marked off the non-Arya Dasas and Dasyus, and also the more enigmatic Panis, as dark-skinned worshippers of demons, any attack against their forts or robbery of their cows needed no further justification. It is such political and economic conflicts that ultimately explain not only why the Aryas fought with the Dasas and Dasyus but also why the Aryas fought among themselves. The conflicts among the Arya groups undoubtedly had to be legitimized for other reasons than religion, skin colour or language, but it is evident that this was never an insurmountable obstacle for such conflicts to take place.

The fact that armed conflicts for political and economic power could be launched by ascendant Arya groups against both Aryas and Dasas, however, does not mean that the arguments used to legitimate such conflicts were unimportant. By the end of the Vedic period the word ‘Dasa’ usually meant ‘slave’ or ‘servant’ rather than ‘non-Arya’, whereas the word ‘Arya’ was coming to mean ‘noble person’ or ‘gentleman’. From the point of view of the ascendant Aryas, the demon-worshipping and dark-skinned Dasas could be legitimately enslaved or reduced to Shudra status, other Aryas evidently could not.

Religious differences

How do the poets of the Rg-veda indicate the religious differences between the Aryas and the non-Aryas? The poets nowhere give any description of the religion of the non-Aryas except to say that they do not offer sacrifices or worship the gods of the Aryas. The only significant exceptions to this absence of detailed information about non-Arya religion are: (1) two references to the non-Aryas as sisna-devas (7. 21. 5; 10. 99. 3), a word which has been interpreted as meaning ‘those whose god is the male phallus’ and hence worshippers of the linga, and (2) a few references to the non-Aryas as being cunning or being sorcerers (e.g. mayavan, 4. 16. 9). Otherwise, the Rg-veda references to the religious
beliefs of the various groups of non-Aryas consist almost exclusively of negative epithets such as *a-yajvana* (not sacrificing) (1. 33. 4; 8. 70. 11); *a-vrata* (unruly, lawless, irreligious) (1. 51. 8; 1. 101. 2; 1. 130. 8; 1. 175. 3; 9. 41. 2; 9. 73. 5); *a-sunvantam* (who does not press out [the Soma]) (1. 176. 4); *nasiram duhre* (who do not milk the milk and Soma mixture) (3. 53. 14); *a-brahma* (not having [the Word] *brahman*) (4. 16. 9); *aprnat* (not giving gifts) (5. 7. 10); *a-kratu* (without sacrifices, without power), *a-sraddha* (without faith), *a-vrdha* (without blessing), *a-yajña* (without sacrifices), and *a-yajyu* (without sacrifices) (7. 6. 3); *anya-vrata* (having other rites or another religion) (8. 70. 11; 10. 22. 8); *viso adevih* (godless tribes)(8. 96. 15); *a-karman* (without sacrifices or rites) (10. 22. 8); *an-asir-da* (not giving [?] the mixture of milk and Soma) and *satya-dhvrt* (perverting truth) (10. 27. 1); *a-devayu* (godless) (8. 70. 11; 10. 27. 2; 10. 27. 3); *an-indra* (Indra-less) (10. 27. 6; 10. 48. 7); *an-rc* (without Vedic verses) (10. 105. 8); and *a-deva* (godless) (8. 70. 7; 10. 38. 3; 10. 138. 4).\(^{15}\)

What these epithets clearly show is that the Vedic poets evidently knew very little about the religion of the non-Aryas. Its main characteristics, from an Arya perspective, seem to have been its lack of sacrifices, the absence of Soma, and perhaps a lack of gods, or at least of gods similar to Arya gods. Whatever the Dasa religion was, however, the Aryas clearly regarded it as inferior to their own and accepted these religious differences as the principal markers of the ethnic boundary between themselves and the Dasas.

**Skin-colour differences**

The *Rg-veda* references to the non-Aryas (whether divine or human) as being dark or dark-skinned are also fairly frequent. Since the issue of skin colour, as already indicated, has drawn dismissive comments from Thapar and Trautmann and other scholars, I would

\(^{15}\) Many of these terms occur more times than are indicated by the references given here. Here I have included only the occurrences that can be clearly linked to non-Arya groups. The meanings given here are in several cases debateable or ambiguous. I have followed the meanings given in Geldner’s German translation (1951-57) and in Sayana.
like to examine this question in a little more detail. In the *Rg-veda* there are three references to the black or dark skin of non-Aryas or demons that specifically use the word ‘skin’ (**tvac**): (1) in *Rg-veda* 9. 41. 1, Soma is described as killing the black skin (**krsnam ... tvacam**), evidently referring to the irreligious (**avrata**) Dasyu of the following verse; (2) in *Rg-veda* 9. 73. 5, ‘they’, possibly the pressing stones for Soma, ‘burn up the irreligious men and by means of **maya** blow away from the earth and from heaven the dark skin that Indra hates (**samdahamto avratan / imdra-dvistam apa dhamamti mayaya tvacam asiknim bhumo divas pari**); (3) in *Rg-veda* 1. 130. 8, Indra helped the ‘sacrificing Arya (**yajamanam aryam**’) by means of ‘punishing irreligious men and made subject to Manu the black skin (**manave sasad avratan tvacam krnam arandhayat**’). Although Sayana takes this last verse to mean that Indra flayed the black skin of an Asura (presumably a non-human demon), the reference to ‘irreligious men’ (**avratan**), an epithet often used elsewhere for Dasas and other non-Aryas, shows clearly that humans are intended.

Trautmann (1997: 212-15) mentions only two of these three passages (1. 130. 8 and another that is wrongly numbered) and cites Sayana as support against the idea that humans are meant in the case of *Rg-veda* 1. 130. 8. But although it is true that there are only three specific *Rg-veda* references the dark **skins** of the non-Aryas, the word ‘skin’ only appears in the *Rg-veda* a total of twenty-five times, a large majority of which refer to the animal skins used in pressing the Soma plant. Apart from the three indicated passages that refer to the dark colour of the non-Aryas’ skin, the *Rg-veda* does not use the word ‘skin’ with relation to either the non-Aryas or the Aryas themselves.

Much additional evidence against the insistence of Trautmann and Thapar that the skin colour of the non-Aryas was unimportant for the authors of the *Rg-veda* is found in other *Rg-veda* references to the dark colour of the non-Aryas that appear without the specific use of the word ‘skin’. To assume that these references to the ‘dark’ or ‘black’ non-Aryas do not in fact indicate the colour of their skin is simply not plausible. Some of the references may be partly or largely metaphorical, as I have noted, but even in these cases the implied allusions to skin colour seem to me to be virtually certain.

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16 Another scholar who has recently looked closely at the Vedic the skin-colour references is Hans Hock (1999). He tends to side with the views expressed by Trautmann and Thapar.
Here are most of these *Rg-veda* passages (in order of their appearance). In *Rg-veda* 1. 101. 1, the poet says: ‘Sing praises with offerings to him [=Indra] who gives joy and who, with Rjisvan, killed the black offspring [or the black pregnant women] (*krṣṇa-garbhaḥ*). Sayana identifies the *krṣṇa-garbhaḥ* as the wives of an Asura named Kṛṣṇa, but R. S. Sharma (1958: 12) and others have argued that this interpretation is quite doubtful. In verse 5 of this same hymn, Indra’s enemies are specifically identified as Dasyus. At *Rg-veda* 2. 20. 7, the poet says: ‘Indra the Vṛtra-killer, the breaker of forts, tore to pieces the female Dasas who had black vulvae (*krṣṇa-yonih . . . dasih*).’ Parpola (1988: 209), evidently basing himself on Geldner, translates: ‘Indra . . . has torn open the (castles) of the Dasas, which in their wombs hid the black people’. This is an interesting interpretation, but neither the *Rg-veda* text nor Sayana mention any castles. *Rg-veda* 4. 16 invokes Indra to help Kutsa and Rjisvan to slay the Dasyus. Verse 13 of this hymn says: ‘You threw down the fifty-thousand blacks, and broke their forts as if [they were] old garments’. The fifty-thousand ‘blacks’, like the leader Pipru mentioned in the first half of this verse, are clearly Dasyus. In *Rg-veda* 5. 14. 4, the poet says that Agni killed the Dasyus, ‘the dark by the light [*jyotis-tamah*]’. In *Rg-veda* 6. 47. 21, the poet invokes Indra, who ‘drove away the blacks [*krṣṇa asedhat*]’ and ‘killed the Dasas [*ahan dasah*]’. In *Rg-veda* 7. 5. 3, the poet invokes Agni and says: ‘From fear of you the dark tribes went in all directions, abandoning their possessions [*tvad bhiya visa ayann asiknir asamana jahatir bhojanani*]’. In verse 6, these enemies are identified as Dasyus. In *Rg-veda* 8. 96. 13-15, a warrior called Kṛṣṇa, here probably a proper noun, with ten thousand soldiers called ‘godless tribes’ [*viso adevih*] is defeated by Indra. Sayana glosses these ‘godless tribes’ as black-coloured Asuras’, but the Dasas, mentioned in verse 19, are more likely intended.

If the Dasyus, Dasas and other non-Aryas were black-coloured in the eyes of the Vedic poets, then it is logical to assume that the Aryas should have been seen as white or fair. Here, however, the evidence is curiously sparse. Although the Arya gods Agni, Indra, Surya, and Savitr are often described as shining or filled with light, the colour of more human Aryas is never clearly indicated in the *Rg-veda*. The most suggestive *Rg-veda* passage (1. 100. 18) states: ‘After slaying the Dasyus and the Simyus . . . let him [i.e. Indra]
with his white friends [sakhibhih svitnyebhih] win land, let him win the sun, water . . . .  

Macdonell and Keith do, however, give a few references to Brahmins and Vaishyas being called white or fair in later Vedic literature (1982: vol. 2, p. 247n). Evidently the dark colour of the non-Aryas was regarded as more important than the presumably fairer colour of the Aryas.

**Languages differences**

The third component of the *Rg-veda* characterization of the non-Aryas is their language or speech. Here, however, the references to Dasa, Dasyu or Pani speech are very few in number. Most importantly, not a single one of these references directly claims that the non-Aryas spoke languages different from that of the Aryas. The key word here is the compound *mrdhra-vac*. The word appears six times in the *Rg-veda* (1. 174. 2; 5. 29. 10; 5. 32. 8; 7. 6. 3; 7. 18. 13; 10. 23. 5), but it is not used in later texts. Its etymology is too uncertain to be of much use in determining its meaning. Geldner (1951-1957), the most respected translator of the *Rg-veda* (into German), consistently renders *mrdhra-vac* as ‘missredenden’, a word that retranslates into English as ‘of foul speech’ or ‘of hostile speech’. Macdonell and Keith (1982: vol. 1, p. 356) likewise render *mrdhra-vac* as ‘of hostile speech’. Parpola (1988: 219-20) renders the term as ‘contemptuously or inimically speaking’ and further suggests ‘that this word refers to the threats of smashing the adversary’s head in verbal contests’. Curiously, neither Thapar nor Trautmann refers to these overlapping interpretations proposed by these key *Rg-veda* scholars and now accepted by most other scholars.

The traditional commentator Sayana interprets *mrdhra-vac* in various manners. At *Rg-veda* 1. 174. 2, he glosses it as *marsana-vacana*, which probably means ‘having false speech’. At *Rg-veda* 5. 29. 10 and 5. 32. 8, he glosses it as *himsita-vag-imdriya* which Trautmann interprets as ‘having defective organs of speech’ but which equally likely means ‘having the power of injurious speech’. At *Rg-veda* 7. 6. 3, Sayana glosses *mrdhra-vac* as the similar *himsita-vacaska*. At *Rg-veda* 7. 18. 13, he glosses it as *badha-vac*, meaning

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17 As translated by Parpola 1988: 209. This study by Parpola is the most complete, reliable and up-to-date academic discussion of the Dasas and Dasyus. In some cases, however, his interpretations of Vedic passages and the archaeological evidence are highly speculative.
‘opposing or injurious speech’. At 10. 23. 5, he glosses it as *himsita-vac*, again meaning either ‘defective speech’ or ‘injurious speech’. As has been noted, most modern scholars have accepted the translation ‘of hostile speech’ as the most likely meaning of the *mrdhra-vac*, although a minority of scholars prefer to interpret the word as ‘inarticulate or unintelligible speech’, and a few have suggested that it might, by extension, refer to ‘foreign’ speech.\(^{18}\) In the translations that follow I will use the translations ‘disputatious’ or ‘disputatious speakers’, roughly equivalent to ‘*missredenden*’ or ‘of hostile speech’, as my translation of *mrdhra-vac*.

In two *Rg-veda* passages, the word *mrdhra-vac* directly modifies the Dasyus. *Rg-veda* 5. 29. 10, invoking Indra, says: ‘You killed the noseless [or mouthless] Dasyus with [your] weapon, and enclosed the disputatious speakers in their home [or grave] (*anaso dasyumr amrno vadhena ni duryona avrnan mrdhra-vacah*)’. Here the well-known reference to the Dasyus as *anas* (‘noseless’, *a-nas*, or ‘mouthless’, *an-as*) is best ignored since in either case the sense is ambiguous at best. The second passage, *Rg-veda* 7. 6. 3, says: ‘The powerless, false, disputatious, faithless, miserly, sacrificeless Panis: Agni blew those Dasyus away (*tan dasyumr agnir vivaya*). *Rg-veda* 1. 174. 2. states: ‘Indra, may you tame the disputatious tribes (*visah*) and break the seven autumn forts, their shelter’. The tribes mentioned here can also be identified as Dasas from the mention of the autumn forts. Also, verse 7 of this hymn identifies Indra’s enemy as a Dasa.\(^{19}\) *Rg-veda* 5. 32. 8, using words quite similar to those applied to the Dasyus in 5. 29. 10, again invokes Indra: ‘With [his] mighty weapon [he] enclosed the footless, disputatious ogre in [his] home (*apadam atram mahata vadhena ni duryona avrnan mrdhra-vacam*)’.\(^{20}\) In this hymn this enemy of Indra is also called ‘the Danava’. Although a demon is evidently intended, the word probably has an overlapping human referent. Parpola (1988: 220) suggests, however, that

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\(^{18}\) See, for instance, Parasher 1991: 56.

\(^{19}\) Parpola (1988: 220) translates this curious verse 7 as follows: ‘... Make the earth a pillow for the Dasa (i.e. strike him to lie on the ground)! ... May he bring the Kuyavac into a bad womb, in disrespect ...’

\(^{20}\) Parpola (ibid.) translates this verse as follows: ‘He (i.e. Indra) with his great weapon has hidden down in the bad womb (i.e. grave?) the footless devourer, the *mrdhra-vac*-’.
the ‘ogre’ of *Rg-veda* 5. 32. 8 is probably ‘the mythical Dasa demon Susna ‘drought’, the enemy of Kutsa’.

In *Rg-veda* 10. 23. 5, the poet praises Indra as one ‘who with his voice killed many thousand inauspicious [?women] who had loud voices, and spoke with disputatious speech (*yo vaca vivaco mrdhra-vacah puru sahasrasiva jaghana*). The ‘inauspicious [?women]’ are probably the Dasas mentioned in verse 2. What makes this passage particularly interesting is the possibility that the word *vivac* may mean not ‘having a loud voice’ but rather either ‘having different speech’ or ‘verbally disputing’ (as in an assembly debate). If ‘the having different (i.e. foreign) speech’ interpretation is correct, this may be the only passage in the *Rg-veda* to refer directly to people speaking ‘foreign’ languages. If the ‘verbally disputing’ interpretation is correct, the passage suggests that the Dasas spoke a language intelligible to the Aryas, even an Arya language. Parpola (1988: 220) favours the latter interpretation and translates ‘*vi-vac*’ as ‘yet another characterization of the enemy, which means “disputing, quarrelling”, or “solving (a question or riddle)” ’.

In the above five passages, an interpretation of *mrdhra-vac* as implying ‘unintelligible or foreign speech’ is barely possible, although I think that it is unlikely. In *Rg-veda* 7. 18, the famous Ten Kings hymn, however, the word *mrdhra-vac* cannot have this sense. Verse 13 says: ‘Indra forcibly broke the seven forts. The goods of Anu’s son he gave to Trtsu. May we be victorious in the assembly over the hostile-speaking Puru (*jesma purum vidathe mrdhra-vacam*).’ Although Puru is described in this hymn as the enemy of the victorious Trtsu king, Sudas, Puru is also known from other hymns to have been an Arya person and/or tribe. For this reason, here *mrdhra-vac* cannot plausibly mean ‘unintelligible or foreign speech’.

Unless the term *mrdhra-vac*, against overwhelming odds, does mean ‘foreign speech’, however, nowhere in the *Rg-veda*, or in any of the other three Vedas, is there any clear mention of the fact that the non-Aryas spoke other languages, much less that the Aryas understood the difference between Aryan and non-Aryan language families (in the sense of modern historical linguistics), or that they distinguished themselves from non-Aryas on this basis. Later Vedic authors undoubtedly made remarkable advances in linguistic analysis, but even they showed virtually no interest in the identification and comparison of language families. The important point to stress in the present context is that
the authors of the *Rg-veda* (and the other three Vedas as well) clearly did not regard the undoubted language differences between the Aryas and non-Aryas, or among various groups of the Aryas themselves, as anything particularly significant.

Why this should be the case is uncertain. The Vedic poets must have known much about different languages and dialects and such differences are sometimes mentioned in later Vedic literature. Perhaps the Indo-Aryan speaking tribes themselves spoke mutually unintelligible dialects and hence had little reason to specially note their linguistic differences with non-Aryas. Perhaps the peaceful contact between the Aryas and non-Aryas was so slight in early times that they had little need to talk to each other. Perhaps a bilingual culture had already developed, at least among the non-Aryas who would have had more reason to learn the languages of the evidently dominant Aryas. The discussions of non-Aryan language influence on Vedic Sanskrit by Madhav Deshpande (1995; 1993) tend to point in this direction.

It is even possible that some of the non-Arya tribes such as the Dasas, Dasyus and Panis, were themselves originally speakers of Indo-Aryan languages. Asko Parpola makes the plausible suggestion that the Dasas, Dasyus and Panis may have been Indo-Aryan speakers who first fought with the Vedic Aryas in Afghanistan. Whether this is true or not, it is clear that the word ‘Arya’ as used in the *Rg-veda* referred to what we would now call an ethnic group encompassing several different clans or tribes, not a linguistic group. As Parpola (1988: 219) notes: ‘We must distinguish between the modern use of the name ‘Aryan’ to denote a branch of the Indo-European language family, and the ancient tribal name used of themselves by many, but not necessarily all, peoples who have spoken those languages’. Here Parpola, like Thapar, cuts the link between language and ethnic group, but he does so in a way that turns Thapar’s views upside down. Arya is not defined as whoever speaks Indo-Aryan languages. Rather the Aryas become simply one of several different ethnic groups who speak Indo-Aryan languages.

My reading of the *Rg-veda* evidence, then, is that the Rg-vedic Aryas expressed little or no interest in their linguistic differentiation from the non-Aryas. Thinking about this in comparative terms, why should they have done so? Is there any evidence that any dynasty of historical South Asia differentiated themselves primarily (or even to a significant degree) from their enemies on the basis of linguistic differences? Does the
The author of Samudra Gupta’s Allahabad prasasti, for example, castigate the languages of the dynasties Samudra conquered? Does any king or conquering group in South Asia ever do this? Even if some such evidence can be found somewhere, it seems clear that language differences were generally not given much consideration in such contexts (class differentiation by language dialect is of course something else).

The Arya-invasion theory

In addition to her arguments for the importance of language differences and the unimportance of skin-colour differences between the Aryas and Dasas/Dasyus, Thapar also often criticizes the idea that there was anything like an Arya invasion of northwestern South Asia in Rg-vedic or pre-Rg-vedic times. Her basic view seems to be that the Aryas are likely to have immigrated or trickled into South Asia in small bands, most likely as relatively pacific cow herders. In her essay, ‘The Rg-veda: Encapsulating Social Change’, for instance, Thapar writes that we should not think of the entrance of the Aryas into South Asia as ‘either an invasion or a migration into India . . . in . . . overwhelming numbers’. She further claims that earlier scholars had depicted a ‘massive invasion [that] was said to be of a superior race of Aryans who subjugated the autochthons, reduced them to slavery and introduced civilization’ (Thapar 200a: 11). But who has proposed such a view? The main scholars who advocated the view that Arya invaders overthrew the Indus Valley cities (a view now known to be chronologically improbable) are Wheeler and Piggott, but neither of them ever suggested that the Aryas belonged to a ‘superior race’ or that they ‘introduced civilization’ to the people they conquered. Serious scholarly proponents of a ‘massive invasion’ of a ‘superior race’ have in fact never existed. They are imaginary straw men.

The alternate theory that Thapar implicitly promotes is that there simply were no invasions. A number of recent scholars besides Thapar have in fact argued in favour of the theory that the Aryas gradually and peacefully migrated or even ‘infiltrated’ into South Asia. Michael Witzel, who has discussed this question in detail, calls such scholars ‘revisionists’ and stresses the fact that they see the older theory of a large-scale Arya invasion ‘as a means of British policy to justify their own intrusion into India and their subsequent colonial rule: in both cases, a ‘white race’ was seen as subduing the local darker-coloured population’ (Witzel 2001: section 11). Witzel also notes (ibid.) that the
views of these revisionists indirectly lend support to those of the Hindu nationalists, who Witzel calls ‘autochthonists’ since they try to prove that the original homeland of the Aryas was in fact India. Given the widespread acceptance of such autochthonist views among Hindu nationalists, Witzel’s lengthy refutation of them may well be justified. From a strictly scholarly point of view, however, Witzel’s attack on the autochthonists may ultimately prove to have been a case of beating a dead horse.²¹

To her credit, Thapar has proved to be one of the most indefatigable scholarly opponents of the autochthonist position on the South Asian homeland of the Aryas, but her own revisionist position against the Arya invasions, like her position against the colour prejudice of the Aryas, seems to be inspired more by a wish to absolve the Aryas of blame than by an impartial examination of the historical evidence. The Rg-veda passages that give the numbers of warriors participating in the battles between Aryas and Dasas/Dasyus are not numerous and are likely to include considerable exaggeration. It is also not certain that these battles took place at the time of the first entry of the Aryas into South Asia. Nonetheless, it seems to me that the Rg-veda evidence is sufficiently clear to show that the Aryas were organized into large tribe-clans each probably containing several thousand warriors and that these clans fought major battles with large groups of Dasas or Dasyus. For instance, among the passages I have already cited, Rg-veda 4. 16. 13 mentions Indra’s defeat of 50,000 ‘blacks’ and the breaking of their forts. In Rg-veda 8. 96. 13-15, the 10,000 warriors of the ‘godless tribes’ of the warrior Krsna (‘Black’) are defeated by Indra.

The Rg-veda evidence showing that the Arya warriors looked on themselves as conquerors, modelled on Indra and the Maruts, is simply overwhelming. To me the most plausible view is that these entire tribes entered South Asia—one by one or in various combinations—as complete units, conquering whoever they could as they did so. To suggest, even indirectly, that their movement into South Asia consisted primarily of more or less peaceful, small-scale migrations (or even ‘infiltrations’) by bands much smaller than such tribes seems to me to be implausible and contrary to the evidence that exists. To make

²¹ The allusion here is to Witzel’s entertaining Frontline polemic, ‘Horseplay in Harappa’ (2000) that attacks the claim that horses, the pre-eminent Arya animal, were found in the Indus cities. A more lengthy and patient scholarly examination of the autochthonist position is found in Edwin Bryant 2001.
the Aryas into peaceful cowherds seems to me to imply that they followed some sort of pacifistic, Buddhist-like or Jain-like ideology, whereas the *Rg-veda* clearly shows just the opposite. Arya men dedicated much of their lives to war and battle.

When we come to periods of early South Asian history documented by inscriptions, we find that all known major historical ‘migrations’ of peoples into South Asia via the Northwest, initially take the form of invasions or large-scale raids. Here the English and other Europeans are obviously the exceptions, not the models. Should we pacify the invasions of the Sakas, Kusanas, Hunas, Afghans, Mughals, etc. in the same way as Thapar and other revisionists do to the invasion of the Aryas and describe these later invasions as having been simply ‘migrations’ or ‘infiltrations’?

One can certainly argue about the size, number and time-span of the Arya invasions and about the ethnic identity of those they conquered (I personally rather like Parpola’s theory of the Aryas replacing post-Harappan Dasas who were themselves originally speakers of Indo-Iranian, i.e. Aryan languages), but the conclusion that several large-size Arya groups entered South Asia as invaders seems to be to be the only view that corresponds to the Vedic evidence. Witzel has written much on this topic and evidently has some sympathy for the revisionist position. Like virtually all recent scholars, he especially rejects ‘the view that ‘Aryan hordes’ sacked the cities of the Harapps’ (Witzel 1995b: 323). Nonetheless, even Witzel is forced to conclude that at least some Aryas entered in large groups (ibid.): ‘It is important to stress the existence of several waves, as well as the process of a gradual trickling in of various clans, occasional larger groups organised into (temporary) polities, and even aggregations of tribes such as the *Purus*’.

**Dasas and Dasyus in late Vedic sources**

Most scholars agree that the composition of the *Rg-veda* hymns was spread out over a period of at least one or two hundred years and that the *Rg-veda* was collected and edited in the form of a single authoritative text sometime well after its composition. The Vedic texts composed after the *Rg-veda* are chronologically spread out over at least two or three hundred years after the composition of the *Rg-veda* hymns. Unfortunately we know very little about the political history of either period. What we do know, however, is that during the period between the compositions of the hymns of the *Rg-veda* and that of the early
Upanishads, a period Michael Witzel (1995a: section 1) calls (from the point of view of we modern historians) ‘one of the major dark periods of Indian history’, the major tribes mentioned in the *Rg-veda* either disappear or lose much importance and are largely replaced by what can be called the Kuru-Pañcala ‘proto-’ or ‘incipient state’.

By the time of the writing of the Vedic *srautasutras, brahmanas*, and *aranyakas* (texts that mostly fall into the fourth and fifth chronological stages that Witzel assigns to Vedic texts (2001: Abbreviations), the political, ethnic, religious, and economic situation of the Aryas had changed substantially. Together with these changes in the historical situation of the Aryas, the ways in which the Vedic authors distinguished between Aryas and non-Aryas also changed dramatically. More specifically, the ideological content of the Aryas’ ideas about who is an Arāya and who is not an Arāya became more a question of defining status groups within Vedic society than of distinguishing between separate and conflictive federative tribal units or ethnic groups. In the space remaining, I want to look briefly at this change, once again paying particular attention to the ideological attitudes of the Aryas toward religion, skin colour, and language.

As has been noted, the *Rg-veda* distinguishes between the Arāya varṇa and the Dasa/Dasyu varṇa. In the later Vedic texts, this ethnically based social distinction tends to give way to a more class-like internal distinction between the higher Arāya varṇa and the lower Shudra varṇa. In these later texts, ethnic outsiders appear in a more marginal role as generic foreign mlecchas or forest peoples. In the process, it is evident that the meanings of Arāya and Dasa/Dasyu have changed significantly.

In the later Vedic period, the word ‘varṇa’ no long refers to two broad tribal or ethnic groups, but rather to the four varṇas first mentioned (without the word varṇa) in the *Purusa-sukta* hymn of the *Rg-veda*, namely the Brahmins, Rajanyas (Kshatriyas), Vaishyas, and Shudras. Similarly, the word ‘Arya’ less frequently refers to the group of tribes or clans who follow Vedic rites and more often refers to the members of the superior two or superior three varṇas among the four varṇas. In some cases, the word ‘dvijā’ (‘twice born’) seems to be functionally equivalent to ‘Arya’. The words ‘Dasa’ and ‘Dasyus’ do not disappear completely but increasingly come to mean ‘servant’ or ‘slave’, a sense that is seems to be found one or two times even in the *Rg-veda*. In many later Vedic contexts ‘Dasa’ and ‘Dasyu’ are replaced, in a functional sense, by the word ‘Shudra’ or by other
terms that refer to several new low-status groups, most notably the Candalas, that are evidently partly tribal and partly occupational.

In this later Vedic period, the darker skin colour of the non-Aryas remains a significant ideological element that the Aryas use to distinguish themselves from the non-Aryas, whether or not these non-Aryas are described as Shudras or as Dasas. Nonetheless, the proportionally smaller numbers of references to skin colour suggest that it was gradually losing its importance for the purpose of differentiation in this period.

Language differences between Aryas and non-Aryas are several times mentioned in later Vedic texts, but language differences remain somewhat marginal to the differentiation between Aryas and non-Aryas, at least in the consciousness of the Aryas themselves. Most later Vedic references to language difference refer to grammatically correct and incorrect language, to Vedic dialects, and not to foreign languages.  

One of the best known references to language difference in late Vedic texts appears in the very late Satapatha-brahmana. This text (3. 2. 1. 23) describes how the gods took the goddess Vac, or Speech, away from the demons and offered her to themselves in the sacrificial fire. In J. Eggeling’s translation of the Madhyandina recension, the passage reads (The Satapatha-brahmana 1972: vol. 2, p. 31):

The gods then cut her off from the Asuras; and having gained possession of her and enveloped her completely in fire, they offered her up as a holocaust, it being an offering of the gods. And in that they offered her with an anushrubh verse, thereby they made her their own; and the Asuras, being deprived of speech, were undone, crying, ‘he ‘lavah! he ‘lavah!’

An important early commentary on this passage was made by the grammarian Patañjali in his Mahabhasya. He interprets the words of the Asuras as equivalent to Sanskrit: ‘he ‘rayah he ‘rayah’, meaning ‘Oh enemies, oh enemies!’ This makes the

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language of the Asuras a form of Prakrit with Sanskrit ‘ra’ changed to ‘la’ and Sanskrit ‘ya’ changed to ‘va’. To my knowledge no other explanation of these words has been offered by Sanskrit linguists, ancient or modern.

What is significant here is again the fact that this is one of the few references to any ‘foreign’ language in all Vedic literature, even if here the foreign language is attributed to demons rather than to non-Arya humans. Scholars who want to argue that references to the dark colour of the Dasas/Dasyus do not refer to real human skin colour should not change horses in mid-stream and here argue that Asura speech is to be understood as really human Dasa speech. I am willing to accept that here the Asura speech is quite possibly meant to be representative of Dasa speech. Even if this is true, however, the passage does not provide an example of words that modern linguists have identified as non-Aryan in origin (and hence representative of the supposed original non-Aryan languages of the Dasas). The Asuras’ words ‘he ‘lavah’ may be incorrect as Sanskrit, but they are not Dravidian or Munda. The most plausible interpretation of this passage is that it offers further evidence that the linguistic distinction between Aryas and non-Aryas had by this time largely become a distinction between those who spoke correct Sanskrit and those who spoke Indo-Aryan Prakrits.

**Conclusions**

Trautmann has called views such as that of Risley about the importance of the racial differentiation of Aryas and non-Aryas the ‘racial theory of Indian civilization’. Trautmann is justified in doing this insofar as Risley and others regard race as the principal category that determines the differentiation of Arya and non-Arya above and beyond what the Aryas and non-Aryas themselves may have thought about their own physical and ethnic differences. When, however, Trautmann and Thapar make language, namely the Aryan and non-Aryan languages as defined by modern historical linguists, the principal category that determines the differentiation of Arya and non-Arya, they are following an intellectual strategy dangerously similar to that of Risley and company. In both cases the modern scholars are claiming to have revealed a principle of differentiation whose importance overrides what the Aryas themselves considered as significant in differentiating themselves from the non-Aryas. In Risley’s case the false views of nineteenth-century ‘race science’
are attributed to the Aryas, in Trautmann’s and Thapar’s case, the more correct views of
teneteenth-century historical linguistics are attributed to these same Aryas. Neither
attribution is historically plausible.

As we have seen, the Arya authors of the early Vedic texts regarded first religion
and second skin colour as the principal markers of their own difference from the Dasas and
Dasyus. Language played at best a minor role in this differentiation. In later Vedic texts,
religion continues to be an important marker to differentiate Aryas and non-Aryas although
the meaning of the terms Arya and non-Arya also change significantly. In these later Vedic
texts, skin-colour differentiation continues to be mentioned but apparently becomes less
important, while language differentiation becomes relatively more important. In this period,
however, the concept of non-Aryas has mutated into two separate groups, Shudras and
mlecchas, while the language differentiation seems to be principally that of speech that is
grammatically correct, especially for use in rituals, and speech that is not. Correct speech is
best understood as that of the Kuru-Pañcalas, namely pre-Panini Sanskrit. Non-Arya speech
is evidently any other language or dialect, including the Indo-Aryan Prakrits.

I regard all these three markers of Arya and non-Arya identity as ideological in the
sense that they are more symbols of difference than real differences. If we modern scholars
want to understand why the Aryas and non-Aryas came into competition and conflict and
why the Aryas chose to differentiate themselves from the non-Aryas in so sharp and
conscious a fashion, the best strategy would be to look more closely at the material and
political aspects of their competition for clues about why and how the Aryas describe the
non-Aryas the way that they do.