

## **ARYAN CONCEPT IN THE HISTORY OF SOUTH ASIA**

**Mahinda Somathilake**

*Department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka  
mahindasomathilake@gmail.com*

In the eighteenth century AD, the British, who ruled the Indian subcontinent, believed that it is necessary to learn the traditional Indian law and customs to rule the people of India more effectively. As a result, some English scholars learnt the Sanskrit language and translated some Classical Indian Sanskrit books to English. Of them, William Jones has pointed out that there are many remarkable similarities between the European languages and the Sanskrit language. Soon after, some other prominent European scholars, particularly the German academics, also contributed to this theory immensely. Due to this unusual similarity of the two streams of languages, it was assumed that the ancestors of both the European and Indian peoples originated in a common land and they lived together for many centuries. Accordingly, it was assumed that they originated somewhere in the Central Asian region or in Europe or else in India and three groups of them set off to Europe, Iran and India, in the second millennium BC. Meanwhile, it is revealed that the *Rgveda*, the oldest religious text of the Indo-Aryans (the assumed people who came from Central Asia or Europe to India) mention that the Aryans were superior to the then existing local Indian communities. Some scholars believed that this local community belongs to the Indus Valley Civilization which flourished during the third millennium BC and also supposed that the language used by these foreign invaders was *Arya*. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the word *arya* was used here by the early scholars to indicate only a group who used similar languages, which belong to a common linguistic family. Even so, it seems that the word *arya* has been used by later scholars by changing its original meaning to indicate an ethnic group or a race too. Hence, scholars like Max Muller, the pioneer of the word *arya* itself argued that it is not at all justifiable to use the word *arya* to describe an ethnic group and the word can only be used to indicate a language group. But, it is evident that he was also not in a position to establish that it is a misnomer as it was so popular among the people of the contemporary world. Thus, it is evident that the concept of *arya* was used for several centuries to indicate an ethnic identity of a nation. Hence, some prominent scholars have pointed out that there is no validity in the so-called *Aryan* theory today and argued that it was not only a misnomer but also a myth to a great extent. However, it is evident that due to its close proximity, this so-called *Aryan* concept has been amalgamated into Sri Lankan history too by British scholars and some subsequent Sri Lankan scholars also accepted this theory without any further inquiry. As a result it is stated in almost all the history text books that the first colonization of the island was done by a group of *Aryans*, who came from India in the sixth century BC. Although it is obvious that this is a misnomer, this tendency can still be seen even in present day historical writings, university and school textbooks and also in the Ordinary and Advanced level question papers. Thus, it is evident that there is a tendency among scholars that the *Aryan* concept or the *Aryan* colonization of Sri Lanka is an acceptable fact and it is not at all a misnomer even in their scholarly publications. Thus, the main outcome of this research is that there is no base for the so-called *Aryan* theory of South Asian history and it is only a misnomer. It is only a language group and not at all an ethnic group. Hence, it is necessary to incorporate these findings of the research into the modern historical writings hereafter.

*Financial assistance given by the University of Peradeniya (RG/2012/18/A) is acknowledged.*