



Ancient Humans of Indian Subcontinent

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Abstract: The human population in the Indian subcontinent has undergone phases of rise and fall, during the past 10,000 years. Mythological texts composed during different periods contain indirect descriptions of the then society. The exact time frame of the events is mostly blurred, on account of the lack of concrete proof. The chronology of events, as deduced from old texts and data available about the domestication of animals can give some clues about the civilisations of the past. The author has attempted to get an idea about the ancient human population in the Indian subcontinent by correlating the information gathered from old texts, folklore, as well as recent scientific reports.

Keywords: Early Humans, Neanderthals, Denisovans, Human interaction, Indian mythology, 8.2 ka event

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Introduction

It was understood for a long time that *Homo sapiens* emerged as modern humans, and spread all over the globe. However recent discoveries indicate coexistence of other humans, also related to *Homo sapiens* (Callaway, 2010; Wood, 2014; New Scientist, December 18, 2019). These different humans mingled with each other, and a new generation of humans emerged. The physical features of different humans, deduced by DNA analysis, have been reported in the literature (New Scientist, April 5, 2014). Indian mythological texts also contain descriptions about different types of humans, which indicate a broad resemblance in physical features to the ancient humans, as brought out in recent findings. The descriptions in these texts probably refer to events that occurred around 8000 BC and later. It has been established that the domestication of cows and some other animals took place twice, once around 8000 BC, and later after 6000 BC (www.sciencedaily.com, 2012). Agriculture also shows a gap around the same time period. Languages, as such change

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with time, and words coined in one time frame, may change their meaning in due course. Extracting information from ancient literature, therefore, requires deep study of the context. An attempt has been made here to identify different types of humans living in the past in the Indian sub-continent by taking a close look at the ancient Indian literature.

The Four Yugas

In the mythological texts, the term *yuga* probably implies two thousand years. The first *yuga*, named *Satya yuga* may be thought to have begun around 9000 BC, and lasted till 7000 BC. The next one named *Treta yuga* is the same as the *Ramayana* era. The latter is followed by the *Dwapara yuga* or *Mahabharata* era. The *Satya yuga* should have been the period when the descendants of *Brahma* moved eastward. It is a matter of speculation that this small group moved on a boat via sea route. As *Sindhu* is one of the names for a sea in Sanskrit language, the group itself might have got named as *Sindhu* or Hindu over a period of time. This group consisting of descendants of *Brahma*, moved from their original place, to settle in the Indian subcontinent. The small group moved eastward, and spread slowly all over the region, and got assimilated with other inhabitants living therein. Since it was a small breakaway group, separated from the parent group, they could retain only a few names in their memory, which got included in the information transferred over generations via folklore and oral literature. Slowly, with the passage of time, the word *Brahmin*, earlier used for sons of *Brahma*, was given an entirely new meaning altogether.

The Treta Yuga or the Ramayana Era

The *Ramayana* era, could have existed between 7000 BC and 5000 BC. The cow was just domesticated in that period, and the dog, was not introduced yet to domestication. Clothes made of natural fibre were termed as divine, as it must have been very scarce. The region south of the Vindhya mountains was covered with thick forests. Sea level was, possibly, lower than that at present (Porter, 2001). The chain of tiny islands, between India and Sri Lanka was reportedly filled up with tree branches and stones to create a bund. The word 'Himalaya' literally, could have been used for any high land covered with snow. The temperatures might have been 6^o C lower than at present, and the snow line, accordingly, at a lower level. The performance in physical feats, of the humans of that time, could have been superior as compared to the present, on account of lower temperature of surroundings and possibly a bit higher proportion of oxygen in the atmosphere of that time. Hunting wild animals for food was very common and the same has been depicted vividly in folklores.

Horseback riding has not been mentioned in the Ramayana, which indicates that the horses were at the stage of taming but not full domestication. Horse was used as sacrificial animal as implied by the term *Ashvamedha Yagna*.

End of Ramayana Era and the 8.2 K Event

The city of *Ayodhya*, located at the bank of the river *Sarayu*, possibly faced a strong earthquake resulting in large scale devastation, and death of inhabitants. After a short time, unprecedented floods washed away a large section of the remaining population of the city. The *Ramayana* era civilisation got decimated in this event. The floods could as well have occurred on account of lake burst after earthquake in the upper reaches of the river. It has been reported that, the occurrence of 8.2 K event (6200 BC) during Holocene period gave a big blow to the then civilisations (Allaey et al., 2005). The widespread melting of ice in higher latitudes resulted in lowering of temperatures. Release of ice load resulted in earthquakes and sudden large flow of water in rivers. These events indicate that the *Ramayana* era could have indeed existed around 7000 BC. With similar logic about duration of *yuga*, the *Mahabharata* era, or *Dvapara yuga*, may date possibly between 5000 BC to 3000 BC (Oak, 2018). By this time, temperatures had risen, and the region became more habitable for humans.

Dwapara Yuga or Mahabharata Era

The *Mahabharata* era could also be located on time line using markers of animal domestication. Cows were very likely, re-domesticated around 6000 BC. Dog has been described as pet in *Mahabharata*, indicating that domestication of dog had taken place by that time. Animal husbandry became a well established occupation, agriculture was introduced and rice was available. The description of swamps and poisonous lakes, hints towards serious climatic and geographical changes, which resulted in scarcity of food grains (Chatterjee et al., 2019). The large cattle population had detrimental impact on the environment and over grazing changed the vegetation cover of the area. As the temperature was higher, fur skins were not necessary for protection, and the same have not been indicated either. Presence of *Jambvant* during this period, however, has been indicated.

Domestication of Animals and Agriculture

Time markers of domestication of animals have been reported and discussed in detail in literature, and can conveniently form a basis for estimation of time frame of events described in the ancient Indian texts. The last Great Ice Age occurred around 9000 BC and a change in climate is reported to have occurred around 8500 BC. Horses were tamed by that time and eating horse meat was

probably common as depicted in horse hunting scenes (www.history.com, 2012). Tamed horses may have been used for chariots, but riding requires fully domesticated animals. Chariots have been described in *Ramayana* as well as *Mahabharata*. Camels, reported to have been domesticated around 3000 BC, have no mention in *Mahabharata*. The present blue bull (*Nilgai*), could have existed in large numbers around 9000 BC, and may have been hunted widely along with other wild animals. The gap in domestication of cattle, pointed out earlier, could be on account of decimation of cattle in some catastrophe. It is possible that, the horses as well as cows, went close to extinction due to pressure for food during extended cold spells around 8000 BC, and then got reintroduced at a later date, around 6000 BC. Dog was domesticated around 13000 BC and then again in 6000 BC (Yeomans et al., 2019). Cultivation of wheat and barley started around 7000 BC. Mango fruit, which was possibly introduced in 3000 BC, has neither been described in *Ramayana*, nor *Mahabharata*. The cow was considered so precious during *Ramayana* era that it was an object of jealousy and vulnerable to theft. The description in an episode, about a king being asked to keep a vigil tells about the seriousness of the then situation about cow ownership. It can as well be inferred that cows were just domesticated in that era. The time line of the markers of animal domestication and other known events, along with *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* era, have been given in figure 1.

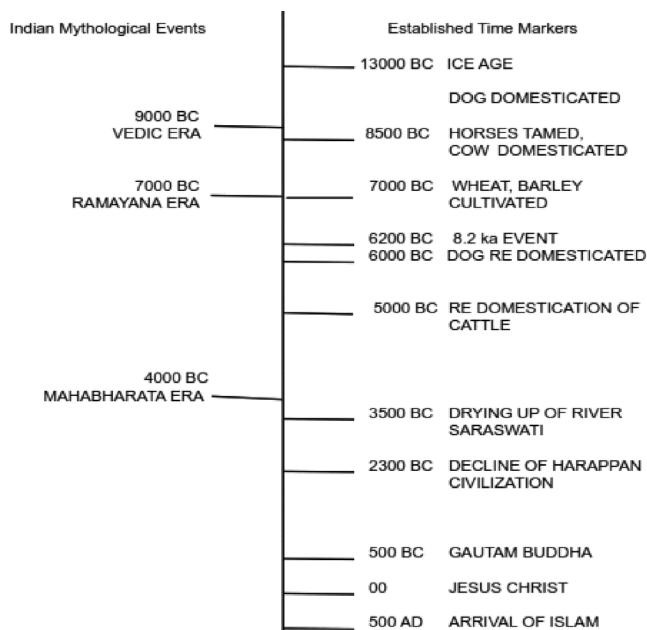


Figure 1: Time line of Indian Mythological Events

Agriculture was probably still not very common in the *Ramayana* era, as there is no mention of food grains as such. Hunting was common, animal meat was the staple diet supplemented by roots, tubers, berries and other jungle fruits. Animals hunted most often were wild boars, tigers and antelopes. Animal skin with fur was widely used for keeping body warm as well as a floor spread to guard against cold. Blue bull was, possibly, very common in the Gangetic plains and hunted extensively, to save crops and plants. The golden deer was rare, and therefore an exciting animal. The cock has been described in *Ramayana*, indicating its antiquity to 6000 BC.

The Three Humans and their Interactions

Three major sub-species of humans, the Homo sapiens, the Neanderthals, and the Denisovans have been reported in literature who lived together, in the time frame of around 18,000 BC (Yong, 2011). The discovery of the Denisovans opened a new dimension to the interactions between societies of that era (Barras, 2017). Denisovans and Neanderthals were equally strong and superior in physique as compared to Homo sapiens. Out of these, Neanderthals can be identified with European region where they lived in a cold climate and were well adapted to it. Neanderthals have been reported to have light skin tone and well built body. Physical features of the Denisovans have been visualised through DNA analysis which indicates dark skin brown hair and big teeth (Reich et al., 2010). Homo sapiens had a similar or better intellectual calibre but a bit lesser physical strength. The different groups could inter-communicate and interbreed as well. They also engaged in frequent wars and it is apparent that Homo sapiens gradually overtook all other humans. In one of the episodes described in the *Ramayana*, a group of invitees for lunch have been referred to as *Brahmins*. This reference points to the existence of Homo sapiens as a separate group among the population of that period. This group had animal flesh as part of food but they did not indulge in cannibalism.

Brahma, Brahmin and Others

The word *Brahma* has been used in Indian mythology, for a person, who is the forefather of the entire human population. The word *Brahmin* probably denotes the descendant of *Brahma* and therefore, might as well have been used for a long time for the Homo sapiens in general (Misra, 2021). In all probability, *Brahma* as well as Abraham or Ebrahim of Abrahamic religions might have been one and the same person. This may be inferred by the sketches usually drawn for Abraham as well as *Brahma* which depict him to be a grand old man with a white beard. The female names associated with Abraham- *Sarah*, *Hagar* and *Keturah*- have striking similarity with the names of females associated with *Brahma*

namely, *Sarasvati*, *Gayatri* and *Shatarupa*. While *Sarasvati* is associated with knowledge as well as an ancient river, *Gayatri* is associated with Sun worship. *Shatarupa* is the name of the wife of legendary *Manu* also considered to be the descendant of *Brahma*. The Hindu mythology also describes these two women to be blood relations of *Brahma*. The *yeti* has been often talked about in ancient texts which reportedly lived in high Himalayas. It is a matter of conjecture that the *yeti*, as described by various writers could have been a descendant of a distinct human group called *Sankara*. This group of humans might have been similar to Neanderthals who lived in the high mountains, got well adapted to cold climate, and possessed superior physical attributes. Description of ashes applied on whole body indicates efforts made to ward off cold. Use of tiger skin as clothing also points in the same direction. The garland of skull, attributed to this group, points towards human sacrifice or cannibalism. *Sankar* was also considered as deity of fertility in its iconic form representing sexual reproduction.

Humans of Mixed Origin

The other humans of mixed origin, *Devata* and *Daitya*, remained distinguishable for a long time. Mixing of *Homo sapiens* with *Devata* and *Daitya* led to a lineage of *Yaksha*, *Yogini* and numerous others. The thin population of *Homo erectus*, probably still surviving at that time, interbred with other groups to create different sub-species of humans. These were called, *Vaanara* or humans living in caves and jungles. This population could have been present in the Indian peninsular region well before the arrival of *Homo sapiens*, Denisovans and Neanderthals. The intermixing of *Homo sapiens*, Denisovans and Neanderthals resulted in a range of skin hues from fair to dark and changes in body structure which is reflected in the present Indian population. The different humans as described in scientific literature, and their nearest match with descriptions in the Indian mythology have been given in table 1.

Table I: Ancient Humans in the Indian Subcontinent

S. No	Scientific name	Nearest match in Epic	Remarks
1	<i>Homo erectus</i>	<i>Vaanara</i> or <i>Hanuman</i>	Cave dwellers, Hunter gatherers.
2	<i>Homo ergaster</i>	<i>Jambawanta</i>	Very hairy humans, physically stronger
3	Neanderthal	<i>Devata</i> , <i>Deva</i> , <i>Sura</i> , <i>Sankara</i>	Fair skinned, tall, handsome and intelligent. Lived in highlands, physically robust, wore animal skin.
4	Denisovan,	<i>Rakshasa</i> , <i>Asura</i> or <i>Nishachara</i>	Lived in warmer regions, night hunters, seafarers and possibly cannibals.
5	<i>Homo Sapiens</i> .	<i>Brahmin</i> , <i>Bhudeva</i>	New intelligent humans, good at archery, wore animal hide, used animal meat, fruits and roots as food.

Devata and Asura (Daitya or Rakshasa)

The word *Devata* in Indian mythology had been assigned to a person having fair skin and strong body which closely matched to the physical features of Neanderthals. The physical features of the Denisovans on the other hand appear to be similar to the description of *Rakshasa*, who possibly practiced cannibalism but adapted new food habits after coming in contact with other humans. The two titles of *Devata* and *Daitya* have been used for half brothers having the same father called, *Kashyap* and two different mothers, *Aditi* and *Diti* respectively. *Daitya's* have also been referred to as *Nishachara* i.e. those who come out in night, as well as *Rakshasa*, i.e. protectors! The words *Danav* and *Danuj*, have also been used for *Daitya*. While *Diti* had possibly been from Denisovan group as exemplified by dark skin of *Daityas*, *Aditi* could have been from Neanderthal group. Indian mythological texts indicate that *Rakshasas* had enmity towards *Brahmins* as well as *Devata*. Legendary figures 'Rama' and 'Krishna' possibly would have been descendants of more ancient *Devata*, 'Vishnu' and termed as *avatar* which means the descendant in literal sense. Long arms and archery attributed to legendary *Rama* indicate his presence earlier in the timeline. As far as legendary *Krishna* is concerned, behavioural attributes described to be associated with him are very close to interpersonal relations in present day society indicating his arrival on the scene at a later date.

The Twice Born, or Dwij

The word "dwij" is commonly believed to be representing twice borne, or "savarna" Hindus, who undergo the sacred thread ceremony which has been in vogue since a very long time. "dwij" is related to the word "dwit" of Sanskrit language, which refers to twice or a dual. It appears that the title "dwij" might have been broadly used to represent a population of descendants of union between Neanderthals and Denisovans. It is worth noting that in some of the communities in North India there is a custom of worshipping family deities before any social function. These deities are "goria" meaning white "karia" meaning black and "devi" as female deity. This hints towards hybrid origin of the population. In another observation related to the above discussion we may compare the two words "duit" and "deutsche" used in Europe which sound similar to "dwij". While the word "duit" is known to be used in Holland, the word "deutsche" used in Germany is also spoken like "doiche".

A schematic block showing different humans with their titles in the Indian subcontinent, as matched to their closest features has been given in Figure 2.

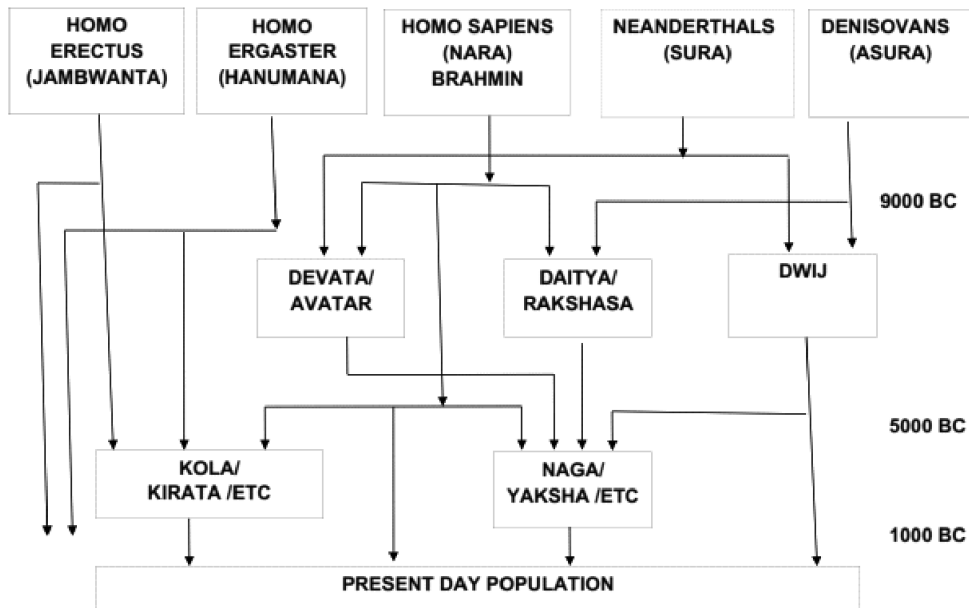


Figure 2: Past Population Model for the Indian Subcontinent

Jambawanta and Hanumana

One may try to decipher various humans from the descriptions given in the epic *Ramayana* (Chaubey et al., 2015). There is a small but definite chance that the Homo erectus as well as Homo ergaster existed in the Indian peninsula even before the arrival of other humans. One of the ancient names for the Indian peninsula has been *Jambudwip* meaning *Jambu* Island. Thereby, the old inhabitants could have been named as *Jambwant* meaning residents of *Jambudwip*. The term *Rincho*, or bear, has also been used for the same group. The term *Vaanara* has possibly been used for a larger group which not only included Homo erectus or Homo ergaster but also their descendants born as a result of union with newly arrived Homo sapiens and others. The legendary *Hanumana* could also have been one of the members of such a clan. Body features of legendary *Hanumana* as described in mythological texts indicate that he possessed a stout body covered with hair of golden yellow colour. The chin was depressed hence the name *Hanumana* was given to him. The tail associated with him could probably had been a long rope wrapped around waste to be used during hunting and other such activities in the forest. The incidence of burning the tail also corroborated it. A burning live tail would have been too painful for him to move around for a long time. The *Jambawanta* had a bit different features. The long lower jaw and spout like face along with dark

hair all over the body gave him a resemblance to a bear. Both these humans were able to verbally communicate however, *Jambawanta* possibly spoke very little. The folklore about *Hanumana* being alive for long time can be explained by the possibility that his clan may have existed for long period of time. The legendary *Hanumana* of *Ramayana* fame however, may not have survived much longer than his natural age. The *Vaanara* as well as *Jambawanta* dwindled in number, over a period of time, and became extinct due to genetic and other factors.

Conclusion

The earliest man referred to as *Brahma* in Hindu mythology is possibly the same person as Abraham or Ebrahim. The word *Brahmin* has been used in the Indian mythology for descendants of *Brahma*, which hints toward its use as a general term for the *Homo sapiens*. The other humans of mixed population co existed with the *Homo sapiens*, and interbred as well. The early humans or *Vanara*, have been wrongly equated with apes in the Indian texts composed at a later date.

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