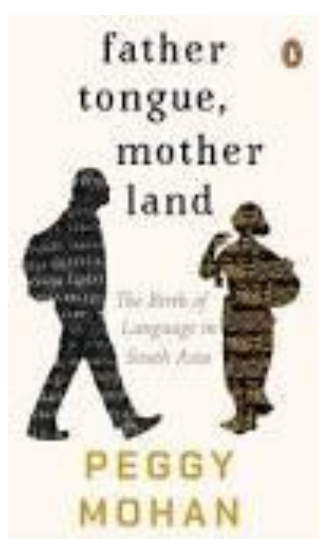




Book Review

Father Tongue, Mother Land: The Birth of Language in South Asia by Peggy Mohan. Gurugram (Haryana), Penguin Random House (India) 2025, pp. 361. ₹699 (hardcover).



The first migration of human beings into the Indian subcontinent is said to have occurred somewhere around 70,000 years ago. This was the period of the last **Ice Age** with temperatures varying from low to very low. Sheets of ice covered most parts of the globe, at times three hundred miles thick! Since a large part of the oceans froze due to glaciation, the sea levels fell 130 metres below the current sea levels. It was a period of dry cold weather and less moisture in the atmosphere. Rainfalls thus declined, more so in the regions away from the equator.

This affected adversely the flora of these regions and the birds and animals dependent on such vegetation also declined. Lack of forage and opportunity of hunting forced the earliest human beings in the African continent namely '*the homo sapiens*' to migrate to other parts of the earth. The lower sea levels had linked the African Continent to the Arabian Peninsula and from there to Eurasia. While one of the branches of '*the homo sapiens*' moved northward to the European Continent the other branch moved to Asia and into the Indian subcontinent.

One of the reasons ascribed for the survival of '*the homo sapiens*' even in those extreme cold climates of the **Ice Age** was their knowledge of 'fire' and their capacity to communicate with each other in 'a common language'. As a linguist, the author of the book is particularly interested in deciphering the essential characteristics of the language spoken by these first migrants into the Indian subcontinent. The inhabitants/aboriginals of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are said to be the living descendants of the first people who migrated into India.

The next wave of migration into the Indian subcontinent took place around nine thousand years ago from the Zagros mountains of Persia. This migration could also have been due to fluctuations in temperature and the severity of the weather in the region where these migrants came from. They settled down first in the Mehrgarh region in the north-west of the Indian sub-continent and later moved further south in the sub-continent. Their

language, however, was different from the language of the first migrants. Available evidence show that the Dravidian languages originated from the language spoken by these people.

This migration further south in the Indian sub-continent led to intermixing of these people with the first migrants living here. New languages evolved due to this intermixing. Fast forward, the author mentions about the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) that existed in the Indian sub-continent around five thousand years ago. One of the major questions posed in the book relates to the language spoken by the people of the IVC. The author gives this language the nomenclature of 'language X'. Was it akin to Sanskrit, as claimed by some people? Was it akin to Tamil, as claimed by others?

The remnants of the developed urban IVC are found today in a vast region stretching from Haryana, Punjab, Gujarat and Sind, in the northwest India. The author –a distinguished linguist - mentions a few (possible) distinguishing features of 'language X,' such as, (a) retroflexion, (b) ergativity, (c) word order (d) gender and (e) postpositions. Use of syllables having the characteristic of 'retroflexion' (e.g., t, th, da, dha) is found in the languages spoken today by the aboriginals of Africa, Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Australia besides all the languages of India.

Similarly, ergativity in sentence formation is unique to the languages spoken today by the people of the IVC periphery, such as, Punjabi, Sindi, Baluchi, Haryanvi, Hindi-Urdu. Based on these distinguishing features, the author finds Tamil closer to 'language X' than Sanskrit. According to the author, however, the more deserving candidate amongst the existing languages of the Indian sub-continent that is akin to 'language X' is 'Burushaski', the language spoken by the people of the Hunza Valley in the Karakoram mountains. As these people remained isolated from the rest of the world, they have best preserved the language spoken by the people of the IVC.

The other major takeaway from the book is that while languages may get enriched by importing words from other languages, the underlying grammar does not change very much. It is this underlying grammar that gives distinctiveness to a language. Based on this premise, the author is able to show that the regional languages of Bhojpuri, Magahi, Maithili, Bengali, Odia and Assamese did not originate from 'Sanskrit'. Their origin may instead be traced to the tribal languages of these regions, collectively known as 'the Munda language'. Munda people, in turn, are claimed to be the progenies of the first migrants into India and the people who migrated from south-east Asia around 4000 years ago.

There are all together eight chapters in the book and the author has covered all the major languages of the Indian sub-continent, which includes Nepalese. The weakness in her approach for explaining the fusion of different languages, however, lies in adopting a single framework of 'Creole', the language spoken in the Caribbean islands. According to her, 'Creole' developed as a result of the male migrants from outside marrying the local women. The children of such parents picked up the words of the language of the

father and the underlying grammar of the language of the mother. This resulted in the birth to a new language, such as, Creole.

According to the author, this 'model' explains broadly the evolution of the different languages in the Indian sub-continent. What escapes the author, perhaps, is the impact of climate change and the consequent severity of weather that forced the whole community to move, rather than only the young males to migrate. The languages in the Indian sub-continent might have, therefore, developed more due to interaction between the various migrating communities living here. Leaving aside this critique, the book makes a fascinating reading and there is much to learn.

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