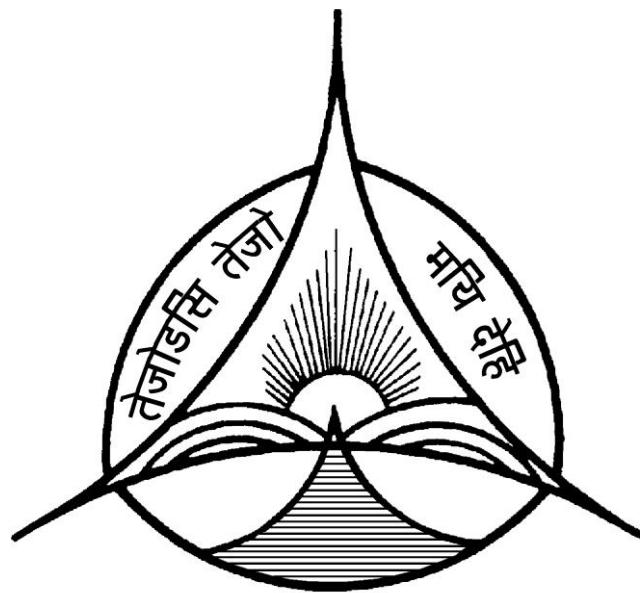


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Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority through Myths of Identity by Dorothy M. Figueira, Delhi: Navayana, 2015

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Dorothy M. Figueira's *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority through Myths of Identity*, is an attempt to plumb the narrative surface to present a historiographic account of the construction of each of the titular categories and identities—Aryans/Jews/Brahmins—and their role and utility in building modern nations and nationalisms, while retaining their civilisational tenor. It presents the various political refigurations and deliberate misreadings and distortions that have allowed various myths and fabulations to be used instrumentally towards politically expedient ends, through the 19th century up till the present. To this end, each of the categories has been taken up for analysis, and Figueira pursues a constructivist methodology in order to explain the manner in which these historical constructions have helped create a composite idea of contemporary identitarian positions in the Indian nation.

In doing thus, Figueira neatly sidesteps traditionalist questions about the legitimacy of historical narratives themselves, and instead views them as the distorted or exaggerated picture of overlapping histories, coupled with the retelling and rewriting of such histories.

Figueira especially explores the manner in which the Aryan myth was constructed as a 'shared myth', allowing both a resurgent Indian nationalism as well as the rise of the German Reich based on a rejection of early Hebraic civilisational narratives (of the Old Testament), and a move towards a nationalist unificatory programme (National Socialism) based on the vilification of the figure of the Jew.

She begins, evidently, with an investigation into the idea of the Aryan, and the reason that such an idea took hold and was popularised in the early 19th century colonial discourse. She takes up textual material as well as authors who were instrumental in legitimising the idea, such as Voltaire and his '...quest for an Aryan *urtext* in the *Ezour Vedam*'. Voltaire sought in India a culture that was removed far from the ancient Hebrews which allowed him to critique the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Figueira digs deeper into the construction of ur-texts and their usage, both within India (as colony), and Europe, reaching its apotheosis in Germany through the work of Max Mueller and his translations of the Vedas and commentaries on them. This was an important juncture, for this event closed the aporetic gap between Aryans and Europe, and brought them closer through the dissemination of canonical Sanskrit texts. In order to fit this mythical ideal even better, the early Indians (authors of the Vedas) were argued to belong to a completely different stock altogether

(in order to account for the actually existing natives the Europeans encountered, whom they completely detested for their barbaric idolatry and degenerated rituals).

In producing such a figure of the Aryan *übermensch*, the Hebraic narrative of history could be replaced by an alternative origin story, and the Jews could now be consigned to the subaltern dustbins of history and their historical position usurped.

This dialectic allowed the reappropriation of the Jew—taken up for analysis in the second section in the book—and the consequent rise of the Brahmin as well as later European cultures through the 19th century. In India, the idea of the Aryan was co-opted into the larger idea of organically privileged Brahminical culture, which participated in and produced national sentiment and identity under colonial British rule led by the reformist mobilisation of organisations such as the Brahmo Samaj under Raja Ram Mohan Roy (with his emphasis on the translation of Sanskrit scriptural texts into the vernacular in order to decouple scripture from the hegemonic control of the Brahmins). Thus, as Figueira mentions, the myth of the Aryan provided alternatives to both the rigid dogma of the Brahmins in India, as well as the historical figure of the Jew in Europe who had occupied centre stage until now. It also provided a contrapuntal voice to the subaltern and marginal communities in India, and which consequently led to the mobilisation of these non-elites under Ambedkar and Phule, who foresaw the danger in the cultural appropriation of the Aryan into a national identity.

This allows Figueira to bring in the Ambedkarite challenge to caste hegemony through his critique of Vedic texts themselves and the legitimacy they provide, ‘as the basis of everything’, to the Aryan myth. She concludes with a revision of the conventional view of the Aryan in India, as either representing the ‘pure’ Hindu, or the racial outsider. It becomes apparent that the Vedas and their construction as the definitive Indian ur-text becomes the fundamental (and reductive) point for Figueira’s analysis. She interprets Phule’s tolerance of the British and his call for the return to a non-Aryan Golden Age delineated in his seminal work *Gulamgiri*, as an articulation of the sentiment against the primacy of the oppressive discourse of the Vedas. However, in stating that ‘Phule specifically designated the *Vedas* as a form of false consciousness’, Figueira seems to be mixing her metaphors, in terms of caste and class, discourse and materiality. While her analysis of cultural myths constructing a larger politico-social reality is well-taken, her analysis appears to disallow other trenchant critiques of the same ideas—postcolonial nationalism, caste and religious identity.

The next intellectual to be taken up for analysis in the section on caste is Dr. Ambedkar, and the text provides a short biographical account (as also of Phule in the earlier section). However, beyond providing minimal information regarding Ambedkar’s distaste for the Vedas and their authority, Aryans, Jews and Brahmins, it does little to extend the argument, or provide alternative material for a detailed analysis of these conflictual textual histories and locations.

This particular section appeared extremely promising since it would have allowed for a relook at current debates on caste as well as nationalist agendas, but was substantively noncommittal with

regard to contemporary debates around the Aryan, its implications for present day Hindutva-India, and its revivalist strategies around Brahminical cultures (including the growing celebratory fervour around figures such as Swami Vivekananda), or even the ironic appropriation of Ambedkar into the very Hindu fold that he resisted throughout.

In providing an insightful and persuasively comparatist account of the Aryan myth, and its vastly varied history of hermeneutic rewriting and its affective engagement with other histories and ideologies (utilising both misreading and mistranslation as methodological tools in achieving such affects), Figueira's work is a compelling intervention. However, it also compels one to demand further critique and analysis, given that these texts and ideas in question have taken on greater historical and political significance in recent years; the book does not do justice to the larger understanding of these events and processes.

Since the book was first published in 2002, and was reissued by Navayana in 2015, it could have been edited and a new preface added in order to address these glaring aporia, which would have gone a long way in becoming a significant critique of historical narratives and their role in the romantic fashioning of a larger nation-state or identity.