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Comment on "South Asia—Perennial Backwater or Object of Biased Assessment:  
A Discussion Based on Current Archaeological, Anthropological, and Genetic  
Evidence"

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Asian Perspectives, Volume 51, Number 1, Spring 2012, pp. 128-129 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: 10.1353/asi.2012.0001



The Journal of Archaeology  
for Asia and the Pacific



Volume 51, Number 1, Spring 2012

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# COMMENTS



*South Asia—Perennial Backwater or Object of Biased Assessment: A Discussion Based on Current Archaeological, Anthropological, and Genetic Evidence*

Comment by PETER BELLWOOD, *School of Archaeology and Anthropology, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia*

The article by Varun Singh (2010) in *Asian Perspectives* issue 49-1 seeks to defend South Asia against perceived imputations of perennial backwardness. Defenses of this type always gain in strength when the advocate actually reads the articles or books he or she wishes to condemn. I cannot defend all of the authors who stand accused in this highly selective summary of evidence (mostly archaeology and physical anthropology, not comparative linguistics), but I do need to defend myself against three completely gratuitous misquotations.

On page 131 of Singh's article, Colin Renfrew and I stand accused of using a model of "deemic diffusion" (*sic*) to claim that ". . . the Fertile Crescent's overflowing population colonized the rest of the world in a single sweep, spreading in an orderly fashion carrying with it farming technology and an entirely new language." A careful reading of my *First Farmers* (Bellwood 2005) will not come across any such statement. Indeed, that book emphasizes that farming systems, populations, and language families developed in and spread from many parts of the world.

I am also accused (page 132) of claiming that "farming spread through India with a 'heavy plod' as India lacked the 'quick smart' hunter-gatherers of the west." What I really stated was (Bellwood 2005:96):

These early spreads of farming were clearly inexorable, even unstoppable in the long term, but they were not instantaneous. Along a given latitude, yes, there could be relative swiftness, as in the case of the northern coastline of the Mediterranean from Greece to Portugal. But across latitude, or across climatic divides, such as that from winter to summer rainfall that separates Iran and Afghanistan from the Ganges Basin, the rate was reduced to a heavy plod. However the farming spread, it was neither by quick-smart adoption by clever hunter-gatherers, nor was it by express trains carrying hungry farmers ever towards the horizon, leaving astonished and landless hunters in their wake.

This statement was certainly not intended to imply that South Asia was a Mesolithic or Neolithic backwater.

Finally, in discussing the origins of the Dravidian language family, Singh goes on to state on page 138:

Bellwood's acceptance for the migration of this language [i.e., the Dravidian family] from the Near East (Bellwood 2005:213) after having expressed some circumspection about McAlpin's claim (2005:211) . . . is all the more astonishing.

But I never stated this. Instead, I offered a scenario that:

During the Neolithic of Iran and Baluchistan, from 7000 BC onward into Early Harappan times, an Elamo-Dravidian linguistic continuum (following McAlpin) was widespread from Khusistan to the Indus and perhaps beyond (Bellwood 2005: 213).

This is not stating that the Dravidian language family came from “the Near East.” My current opinion is that the Dravidian language family was indigenous to the north-western regions of the Indian subcontinent, and that the Indo-Aryan linguistic subgroup of Indo-European was not indigenous to South Asia at all (Bellwood 2007–2008, 2009, 2010). Anyone who claims otherwise should at least refer to some linguistic evidence. Singh does not do this, so his anti-linguistic claims cannot be taken seriously.

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